

A photograph of a snowy forest. In the lower-left foreground, a figure wearing a dark, hooded cloak stands with their back to the camera, looking into the woods. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow, and several tall, thin trees are visible, some with snow-laden branches. The overall atmosphere is quiet and mysterious.

Beauty & the BEAST

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Chapter 1

Once Upon a Time

The servants of Chanceux Chateau would have screamed if they could when the stain glass skylight in the little hall shattered and a young woman fell through the ceiling with the broken glass. She dropped like a twisting cat and landed with an ominous crack.

A footman and one of the grooms reached her first. She was passably pretty but plain, wearing the muted colors of a villager. Her breathing was ragged and her face was tight with pain. “NO!” she screamed when the groom tried to roll her on her side.

The footman and groom leaped backwards. They thought for sure she was unconscious, but the young lady opened and rolled her eyes. She didn’t cry, but she clenched her cloak close to her body with shaking hands.

The groom inched back to her side and extended a cautious hand to her skirt, intending to remove bits of glass that were digging into the cloth.

“Don’t,” the young lady whispered. “My leg—,” she broke off, hissing in pain.

The groom turned helplessly to the footman, who was already signaling a chamber maid to fetch the staff physician.

Hesitantly, the groom crouched at the girl’s side and nudged glass away from her.

“What happened?” a voice growled.

The footman lunged to his feet and hurried to stand in front of the chateau’s lord, gesturing at the broken skylight—where night lurked like a pool of black ink—and then to the fallen girl.

The groom stood as well and bowed to the lord, but he sank back into a crouch when the lord dismissed him.

The groom carefully scooted around the girl’s body, brushing glass away as her breathing came in pained but steady gasps.

“Duval has been called for? Good, he may see to her and send her on her way,” the lord said, his voice the lowest of baritones.

The footman hesitated and pointed to the skylight and a hall door before lifting his hands in a plea.

“I do not care if it is late. She shouldn’t have been skulking around the castle,” the lord said.

The groom stood and waited until he had his lord’s attention before he gestured at the intruder’s leg.

“Fine. Put her in a bedroom for tonight. She leaves at dawn.”

The groom bowed and happily returned to brushing glass away from the intruder/guest. He accidentally nudged her leg when he tried to extract a large shard of red glass from under her cloak.

The girl screamed. It was an utterance of mindless pain that seemed to be squeezed from her heart. “My leg,” she groaned, clenching her eyes shut and finally throwing her arms wide.

The chateau lord turned to the footman. “Shut her up and move her. Immediately!”

The groom almost fell as he tore across the hall to the steward and castle lord like a frightened colt. He frantically slapped his arm before pointing to the girl.

The castle lord sniffed the air, but he need not bother. Even in the dim torchlight he could see the blood spilling from lacerations on the girl’s arms. He growled and stalked to the injured intruder, entering the ring of torchlight.

The girl opened her eyes when she heard him draw close. When she saw him her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Her terror was a sharp scent in the air, and her whole body trembled.

The chateau lord was a beast. He had the head of a black cat. His nose was flat and his teeth were too big for his mouth and poked out of his lips. He had pads on his fingers and palms like a dog, and his finger nails were more like claws—which extended as the frightened girl shivered.

He was broad shouldered like a massive dog, and his legs were like the hind legs of a cat. Instead of bending forward on knees his legs curved back and gave him a swaying gate.

He was covered in black fur, but the worst of it was his eyes. His eyes were amber and the pupils were slitted like a mindless beast.

The chateau lord ignored the reaction and picked her up like she weighed no more than a corn husk.

Sound finally ripped through the girl’s terror. She howled as the lord carried her—jostling her leg. Her eyes rolled back and she fell silent when she fainted.

The chateau lord glanced up at the hole punched through his ceiling. “She fell from there? It’s a surprise she’s alive,” he said as he left the little hall, his nails clicking on the floor as his servants scurried around him like fleas.



Once upon a time there was a handsome prince who was cursed by an evil witch.

No.

Once upon a time there was an illegitimate prince—the son of the King—who was sentenced to insanity by a wicked witch and was rescued by the curse of a beautiful enchantress.

The fairy tale was a stark reality for those who were connected to the crown of Loire. To everyone else it was a fable, a tale told to teach children morals. Elle had fallen straight into the fairy tale.

The pain woke Elle like a starved animal.

She remembered chasing after the villagers who were poking around the castle and stomping through the gardens. She had just followed them out of the rose garden and had leaped from one piece of the castle’s sloping roof to the next. But it was black, and Elle miscalculated her landing. Instead of hitting shingles she hit glass and plummeted straight through. She didn’t remember much after that besides pain and a beastly shape.

Someone touched her leg, and Elle groaned.

When she finally opened her eyes there were three people in her room. A woman stood at a fireplace on the far end of the room, a second woman stood at the door, and the third person in the room was a man who was nodding at her bare leg.

The bedroom was posh, better than any room Elle had ever stayed at in her life. It smelled woodsy, probably from the pile of herb roots the man was grating and stirring into a large bowl.

Elle rubbed her nose, pausing to consider the bandages wrapped around her arms. The gesture drew the man’s attention, and he straightened up and smiled at her, giving Elle the chance to see his face—or what little of it wasn’t hidden. A black mask edged in blue partially covered his forehead, swooped down over his nose and cut off just above the lips, running across his cheeks. It was too dark to see what color his eyes were, but he smelled like the herbs in his concoction.

The man hefted a slate in the air, holding it steady for inspection.

You broke your left leg when you fell. I already set it with some aid. I am preparing a pack of Comfrey herb.

Elle stared at the words for a moment before looking him in the eyes and lying. “I cannot read.”

Elle’s words caused the woman by the fire to tumble across the room. She threw herself in a wooden chair that was placed at the bedside, across from the man—who was presumably some sort of barber-surgeon. The woman behaved more like a hunting hound, eagerly wriggling in her chair, than the ladies maid she was very likely to be based on the fine cloth and elegant cut of her dress. Both she and the maid at the door wore masks identical to the man’s, although theirs were edged in the maroon shades of fine red wines.

The barber-surgeon let his mouth hang open in dismay as he looked back and forth from Elle to the slate. He wiped away the words and wrote something new on it with chalk before showing the slate to the ladies maid and the woman by the door.

One of the women covered her mouth in a gesture of horror. The other whipped out a small slate and began writing on it.

Elle briefly closed her eyes, the pain was incredible. Her leg throbbed and ached with a fierceness Elle thought only torture could deliver. The cuts on her arms stung and prickled. She tried to clear her mind and think through the haze.

Elle hadn’t seen the chateau staff before—she always took the night watch, when everything was quiet and no one stirred.

The gossiping servants of Noyers—the capital of Loire and home of the Royal Family—said the illegitimate prince’s servants had been cursed along with him. The stable boys claimed they were turned into animals, and the kitchen staff insisted the servants were completely invisible, but Elle put the most stock in her superior’s guess. Farand said they had lost their voices and faces. Apparently he was right.

The shush of skirts scraping across the floor prodded Elle from her musings. She opened her eyes just in time to see the maid leave the room, the door closing behind her.

The remaining female servant—the one that looked like a ladies maid—perched at Elle’s side, wearing an eager smile.

Elle gasped in pain when the barber-surgeon began wrapping her leg in bandages that were dripping with the odd smelling sludge. It was hot on Elle's bare skin, and it oozed, but the bandages were skillfully wrapped.

Elle clenched the blankets on the bed, but the barber-surgeon's hands were gentle. He gave Elle a sympathetic smile, but did not pause in his task.

The ladies maid reached out and patted Elle's hand before retrieving a comb and teasing Elle's black hair out of her face. The two servants worked silently. Elle's unsteady breathing and the crackling fire were the loudest sounds in the room.

The silence was broken a few minutes later by a thunderous voice that stalked towards the room. "—makes sense she can't read. She's an unschooled peasant. That means she is an idiot."

The barber-surgeon plunged his hands in a bucket of water and hastily wiped them clean before he started scribbling away on his slate. The ladies maid at Elle's side did the same, and both of them leaped to their feet and held their slates out when the door was nearly thrown off its hinges.

"I will **not** waste my time again by acting as a translator. Although I will suffer this girl's presence in my chateau I do not want to see her again," the voice growled before a beast entered the room.

He was a horrifying combination of cat and canine, all death and wildness although he spoke crisply with careful enunciation. He was no less terrifying to behold now than he was in the few woozy moments Elle was conscious after falling through the ceiling. If anything he was more alarming, more *wrong* as his hulking body loomed in the cheerful light of the fire.

The maid scurried at his side, but the beast waved her away as he read the slates his other servants held out to him.

The beast—the cursed, illegitimate prince Severin—snarled gutturally in his throat before he turned to Elle, who was sinking low in the bed.

"Your leg is broken. Don't move it or else. Duval will do whatever needs to be done. If you disrespect him I will have you thrown from the castle, broken leg or not," the beastly prince said. He turned on his hind legs—a movement that was too smooth to be human—and started for the door. The ladies maid at Elle's bedside knocked a stool over as she darted in front of the prince and again held her slate up.

“What is your name?” the cursed prince asked without turning around.

Elle deliberated on her answer for a moment, but hastily spoke when the prince started to growl. “Elle.”

“This is Emele. She will see to your needs until your leg has healed sufficiently for you to leave the castle.”

He was out of the room before anyone else could push a slate in his direction.

The barber-surgeon—the cursed prince had called him Duval—shook his head as he presented a glass of liquid to Elle.

Elle sniffed it, blinking when the contents burned her eyes and nose. “Alcohol?”

Duval nodded and went back to wrapping Elle’s exposed leg.

Elle took a swig of the drink and almost coughed. The alcohol was potent and powerful. The whole glass was going to get her drunk worse than a villager during Christmas time. Elle winced and her leg ached. She supposed being drunk was better than being fully conscious of the stabbing pain. “Bottoms up,” she said, toasting the air before tipping the drink back.



When Elle finally woke from her alcohol induced stupor the bandaged sludge on her leg had hardened to a plaster consistency. The barber-surgeon was gone, and light leaked through the top of the heavy, velvet curtains that covered the windows. It was daylight.

The ladies maid from the night before, Emele, was still sitting at Elle’s bedside, stitching the seam of a blue gown.

Elle shifted, and Emele looked up to smile at her.

“Morning,” Elle said, pushing through the pain to adopt the persona of a meek villager. Emele put her work aside before she pulled back the curtains—letting an ocean of glorious sunlight drift across the walls—and straightened the blankets and pillows mounded around Elle.

“Beggin’ your pardon, uh, miss, but I’ve got questions ‘bout my leg. Can I talk to sumone?” Elle asked before Emele briefly disappeared out of the room. A bell rang, and Emele was back.

“Oh, thanks,” Elle said, taking the damp towel Emele presented. She wiped off her face and hands before carefully feeling her scalp for slivers of

glass. She remembered being blanketed in the jagged stuff when she first fell, but the servants must have swept it all off.

“Um, ‘bout my—ouch,” Elle said when the ladies maid began attacking her hair with a comb before tying it off with a ribbon. Elle’s scalp still stung when Emele fluttered to the door after a bell rang, she returned to the bed carrying a tray.

“Say, can you—,” Elle started, she cut herself off when Emele placed the tray on a small end table near the bed.

The tray was filled with scrumptious food. There were slices of cheese, wonderfully spiced meat pasties, turnips, and asparagus that dripped with butter.

Emele smiled and poured Elle a cup of tea as Elle slowly cut into the breakfast, reveling in the excellent food. When Elle realized Emele was watching her with round, curious eyes behind her mask, Elle switched to devouring her food with gusto and a general lack of table manners. Even though Elle shoved huge chunks of turnips into her mouth, Emele seemed pleased as she brought Elle a second tray.

When finished, Elle sipped her tea and lounged in the bed, her stomach happily filled for the first time in weeks. Emele settled into her chair at Elle’s bedside, resetting Elle’s thought process.

“What I’ve been meanin’ to ask is, what did the barber-surgeon say ‘bout my leg?” Elle asked, cringing when she shifted and jarred her aching appendage.

Emele did not respond and instead held up a slate that had the word *cheese* written on it. She picked up the plate that held a few leftover slices of cheese from Elle’s breakfast and gestured to it before slowly tracing her finger below the word.

“Cheese?” Elle said.

Emele nodded and set the cheese down before erasing her slate and writing with chalk.

“Fabulous,” Elle muttered. The ladies maid was trying to teach her how to read.

Emele selected a left over turnip and held up the slate, which was now inscribed with the word *turnip*.

“Turnip,” Elle said.

Emele nodded and proceeded to slowly gesture her way through the word, managing to “teach” Elle how to pronounce letters by crawling

through words and making her utter individual syllables.

It was a laborious process, and Elle was thankful when Emele finally fed her a cup of strong alcohol to kill the pain and lull her off to sleep.



When Elle woke up again it was to the careful ministrations of Duval, the barber-surgeon. He was inspecting the stiff bandages, feeling her leg for additional swelling.

“How long?” Elle asked, her voice crusty with sleep and the last bit of alcohol in her system.

Duval looked up.

“How long am I stuck in bed?”

The barber-surgeon hesitated before holding up two fingers. He waited a few moments and then flashed three fingers.

“Twenty three?” Elle guessed.

Duval shook his head.

“Two to three?”

Duval nodded.

“Days?”

Duval shook his head.

“*Weeks?*” Elle yelped, rocketing to an upright position.

The barber-surgeon took a step backwards and nodded.

Elle could do very little except stupidly stare at her leg. Two to three *weeks*? She was supposed to report back to Farand in **a** week! If he thought she deserted her post her entire family would pay. Hopefully whoever was next on duty would notice Elle’s absence and send word to Farand. If they did, and if she was extraordinarily lucky, Farand wouldn’t think she had deserted.

Elle shook her head, too stunned to do anything else. Duval gave her a comforting smile that she did not notice as she collapsed back into the bed.

Duval left as Emele arrived. The ladies maid carried a strangely shaped pillow, which she set about embroidering when she took up her customary position at Elle’s bedside.

Elle lay still for an hour before she tried moving. Just because Duval said she needed two to three weeks of rest didn’t mean she—Elle bit her

tongue to keep from howling. When she moved the pain ripped brutally through her body. She had to stay stationary, there was no way she could drag herself all the way to Noyers.

Elle closed her eyes in an attempt to smother the tears that threatened to fall.

Emele sympathetically patted Elle's hand and skirted around the bed like a mother hen stuffed in a puffy pink dress. She roused Elle for tea and a reading lesson, but Elle didn't have the heart to try.

All the hard work Elle did was for her family, and now because of one stupid mistake everything was going to unravel.



“Enter,” Severin growled when a servant tapped on the door.

Burke, Severin's personal valet, swept inside with great pomp. The man moved like a peacock and had the wardrobe to match. Today he was in prime form as his feathers were displayed with all smugness. He wore ridiculously high heeled shoes that were tied with a blue ribbon and decorated with bows. His petticoat breeches—which were more puffed than even the most daring fashion devotee wore—floated around him like a skirt. He wore a fine waistcoat and a flowing cravat, all giving him the air of a fashionable idiot, but Severin was not deceived. Burke had the mind of a bear trap.

“What is it?” Severin asked.

Burke slid a wicker basket across Severin's desk.

The basket held a sewing needle and a small spool of black thread, a black handkerchief, a chunk of crusty bread that had the density of a turtle shell, several long and oddly bent hair pins, a belt knife, and a silver whistle.

“These are all the items the girl carried on her person?” Severin asked as he held up the bright whistle in the dim light. A gift from a lover, perhaps? It was probably the most expensive item out of the bunch as the belt knife had been sharpened so many times the blade was cheaply thin.

Burke nodded.

Severin tossed the whistle back in the basket. “She must be a villager from Belvenes. Give the items to Emele for storing until the girl is able to stand—but confiscate the belt knife.”

Burke dipped forward in an outlandish bow, took the basket, and left.

Severin sighed—the sound was more guttural than he meant for it to be. The girl was a headache Severin didn't want to deal with. His servants were acting like she was a visiting empress, which wouldn't have bothered Severin if they ceased their tendency to pepper him with irksome questions about the girl's health, treatment, and ignorant inability to read.

"One would think they would have as bleak an outlook as I do pertaining to our curse. All those wasted times and raised hopes," Severin shook his head like a dog, redirecting his thoughts. He needed to go over the notes from his last meeting with his half brother, Crown Prince Lucien.

Severin found the papers and read the first paragraph when there was another knock on the door.

"Enter," Severin said, setting down the papers.

Duval stepped inside Severin's study, a smile twitching on his plump face as he passed his slate to Severin.

Mademoiselle Elle is resting. She has been informed that she will be bedridden for two to three weeks.

"She can go then?"

Duval flatted his lips at Severin and plucked the slate from the illegitimate prince's fingers. He meticulously wiped the slate with a handkerchief before writing.

*No. She must stay in **bed** for two to three weeks.*

Severin narrowed his eyes at his castle's attending barber-surgeon. "How long do you plan for this intruder to stay here?"

Up to six months.

"Absolutely not," Severin said. "The break in her leg couldn't have been that bad—the bone didn't separate much or break through the skin. It shouldn't take months for her to heal."

Duval wrote on his slate.

If you want her to be healed enough to survive the journey back to her village it will be six months.

"Three months. That is all I am giving her. Keep her out of my sight, the less I hear of her the better," Severin said.

A pleased smile twitched on Duval's lips, and Severin flattened his cat ears as he wondered if he hadn't made the exact orders Duval wanted.

“Good evening, Duval,” Severin said before returning his attention to his paperwork.

The barber-surgeon waddled out of the room, closing the door behind him. Severin was able to get to the bottom of the first page of notes before there was another knock at the door.

Severin dropped his hands—and the notes he held—to the desk with a thump and breathed out heavily—eliciting a growl deep in his throat. “Enter,” he said, his deep voice lowered in warning.

Emele glided into the room with a smile, raising Severin’s ire. “What,” he said, his voice flat and void of questions.

Emele smiled and presented her smaller and supposedly more feminine slate to him.

Your Highness, if you wouldn’t mind coming to speak to Elle—

Severin swiped his paw/hand across the slate, erasing the chalk words before bothering to read them all. “No.”

Emele pursed her lips and took her slate back to write on it some more.

But she’s a lovely girl, and I—

“**No.** I suggest you rid yourself of whatever ridiculous idea you have floating around your frill infused head. I will not interact with this intruder. Tell the other servants to stop gossiping and hoping.”

Emele moved, as if to write again.

“Good night, Emele,” Severin said.

Emele’s shoulders drooped, and she left the room.

Severin’s ears flicked as he listened to the ladies maid traipse down the hallway. He relaxed and gathered his papers, keeping one ear cocked as he immersed himself in papers. He was on the fourth page when he heard another set of footsteps.

It was a confident plod, which bespoke much of the walker’s confidence and pushy tendencies.

The hair on the back of Severin’s neck stood on end, and he leaped to his clawed feet. He grabbed a stack of papers and hustled through the study, slipping outside to the balcony. He secured his papers and gracefully climbed over the balcony banister.

Only one person in Chanceux Chateau walked like that, and Severin avoided confronting her at all costs as he usually came out on the losing side—cursed prince or not.

Severin dropped down to a walkway on the next floor, disappearing from sight just as the door to his study was thrown open.

The footsteps moved around his study before disappearing back into the hallway, making Severin's shoulders collapse in a sigh of thankfulness.

He had escaped, this time.



Elle briefly opened her eyes and glanced at the door. Emele was there with a clutch of women. Most smelled like food—kitchen maids most likely—but there was a housemaid and two scullery maids.

They stood together, exchanging slates and reading messages as they gawked at Elle like a flock of birds hoping for scraps. The housemaid was forever smoothing her clothes, and the kitchen maids continuously wiped their hands on their white aprons if they weren't writing out a message.

Elle was surprised, even the scullery maids—the lowest of all servants—were schooled in writing, busily trading slates with each other.

Emele smiled when she realized Elle was awake, and began pushing the women out of the room. The female servants smiled at Elle, and the housemaid resisted Emele long enough to curtsy at Elle before she was shoved out of the door.

Emele closed the door behind them and leaned her back against the fine wooden surface, smiling sheepishly. Her mouth formed an 'O' shape when she was shoved aside like a kitten as the door was flung open.

A short woman who was plump like risen dough stood in the entryway, bearing a tray on one hand and the door knob in the other. Although she was petite, she manhandled the door shut with enviable strength before waddling to Elle's bed side.

Behind her Emele, who had been smashed into the wall, slid to the floor before picking herself up and fluffing her hair and extravagant skirts.

The newcomer set the tray down and smiled at Elle. She too wore the familiar black mask with maroon edging that all the female servants wore, but she smelled like cinnamon and her butter blonde hair was covered by a white coif.

Elle studied the woman's jacket and shift. "You're the...cook?" Elle guessed. It was unusual for a woman to be the head cook, particularly in a chateau.

The doughy woman smiled, pleased, and nodded before she removed covers from Elle's dinner tray.

The tray was filled with cheese, venison, pike, minced pies, peas, strawberries, and candied fruits.

Elle stared at the venison—she had never had deer in all her life, it was only a dish for the rich.

The cook soundlessly laughed at Elle's shock and helped her sit up so she could eat.

Past the cook Emele held up a slate that read *Bernadine*. Elle, suspecting Emele hadn't tutored her yet to a level where she could read names, let her gaze slide across the slate unintelligently, but held the information close.

The cook, Bernadine, conveniently set up the tray for Elle's use and watched her dig in. When Elle looked up from her buttered peas the cook was studying her the same way she would study a piece of meat while looking for the best cut.

The cook cast off the look and smiled when she realized Elle was staring at her.

Elle uneasily swallowed her peas and mentally reviewed her conduct. Everyone seemed to assume Elle was from the village of Belvenes, which was roughly an hour walk from the castle. This suited Elle perfectly as she didn't really want the cursed prince to find out who had plunged through his ceiling. Had Elle acted out of character as a mere village girl?

Elle nibbled on a strawberry as Bernadine and Emele exchanged scribbled messages. When she finished eating the cook took the tray and bustled out of the room.

"Can I sleep now?" Elle asked Emele as the ladies maid fussed with the curtains. The less time she spent awake the better. Unconsciousness stopped the pain—the pain from her leg, the pain from her arms, and the pain in her uneasy heart.

Emele did not acknowledge the request.

Elle stared at the decanter of alcohol sitting on a chest across the room. Emele parked herself between it and Elle and settled down with her slate.

Elle groaned when Emele wrote *book* on the slate before picking up a leather bound book. "I don't want to practice reading I want to sleep," she protested.

Emele held up the book with a resolved smile.
Elle sighed, “Book.”

Chapter 2

A Holiday

It was pouring rain when Crown Prince Lucien arrived at the hunting lodge. Severin, having arrived an hour earlier, escaped the downpour entirely and had the privilege of watching his half brother leap from his carriage and splash to the lodge door.

By the time Lucien entered the lodge he was drenched. His fine blue waistcoat was soaked and his petticoat breeches were splattered with mud. But even though he should have looked like a drowned rat, Lucien managed to wear his pricey—ruined—clothes like they were fit for a king—mostly because they were.

Severin slipped his papers out of the packs he transported them in. “It’s a good look on you,” he said as a puddle collected at Lucien’s feet.

Lucien sourly scrunched up to his face before turning to guards—who were wearing waterproofs—waiting just outside the door. He spoke to them in a lowered tone Severin could barely hear over the rain and gestured outside.

The guards nodded and exited the small hunting lodge before pairing off and setting out on patrols.

“You already had your men search the grounds?” Lucien asked, swatting cobwebs from a chair before he sat. The hunting lodge was a long forsaken lodge of the royal family’s. It hadn’t seen use in over a decade before Severin was cursed and placed himself in exile at Chanceux Chateau. Since then the brothers took to handling their joint business at the lodge, keeping Severin out of the public eye and allowing him to keep his post as his brother’s commanding general.

“I did, but another patrol would be wise. Our enemies would dearly love to see both of us killed in one strike,” Severin said.

Lucien chuckled and leaned back in his chair. “I doubt anyone is brave enough to try killing you now, brother.”

Severin shrugged. “What news do you bring?” he asked, setting an inkwell on his table.

“Very little. As long as you are cursed, preparations for our war with Arcainia are limited at best,” Lucien said

Severin held in a sigh. “I told you, it would not be wise to march against Arcainia. We have been at peace with them for forty years and they have done nothing to offend us. Why do you insist on going forth with your plans?”

Lucien shrugged one shoulder. “Conquest, expanding our rule. The question is why *shouldn’t* we overtake them?”

Severin rubbed one of his velvet ears. “As I am unfit to lead our armies in this cursed condition the question is moot point.”

“I agree, so when are you going to break the curse again?” Lucien asked, latching to the topic eagerly.

“Attempting the same activity multiple times and expecting a different result is not only pointless but insane.”

“No, it is not. All you need is an empty headed girl to fall in love with you and the curse is broken. Truthfully I think that’s the cheapest price I’ve ever heard of for ridding oneself of a curse,” Lucien said.

“She must fall in love with a *beast*, Lucien. You seem to forget that. If it were so easy to get a woman to love me I would have done it already for my servants’ sake—not that I haven’t tried.”

“But this time I think I have the perfect candidate. She’s the daughter of a minor noble—and she loves animals!”

Severin looked down at the table and speared a paper with the tip of his claw. “I have new orders for Rangers Twenty Five, Fifty Two, and Seventy Eight,” he said, speaking of Lucien’s elite troops. They were agents of intelligence trained for observations, combat, recon missions, and spying. Although the Rangers technically were Lucien’s, Severin was key in the creation of the organization, and he moved them around like his personal chess pieces—with Lucien’s permission of course.

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” Lucien said.

Severin handed over papers describing the targets and desired information as well as timeframes.

“It looks agreeable to me, except this,” Lucien said, removing one of the three packets. “Ranger Seventy Eight can’t be spared right now.”

Severin frowned—which was more of a barring of fangs. “What is he doing?”

“A personal intelligence collection mission for me, although recently we’ve fallen out of contact.”

“Ranger Seventy Eight is one of our best intelligencers. Please do not tell me you are risking him with plans for your little war?”

“Tempting, but no. It’s a local case. Should I be afraid of betrayal? There’s been no word for a week or two,” Lucien frowned, fiddling with the frilled throat of his white undershirt.

“Track him down immediately. A missing Ranger as knowledgeable as Seventy Eight is no small matter,” Severin hissed.

Lucien smiled. It wasn’t his pretty one he used for portraits and ladies, but the smug smile he wore when he was about to get his way. “Yes,” he agreed. “Since you can’t use Seventy Eight, who would you like to send instead?”

The brothers planned for hours, pouring over maps, moving diagrams and arguing army locations before dusk closed in on the hunting lodge.

“What if we move the southern army to Duke Villette’s for the winter? His people are usually plagued by bandits. I imagine he would welcome the military strength,” Severin said.

Lucien scrubbed at his eyes. “Can’t we be done? We’ve talked strategy and military movements for *hours*. Don’t you have any supply requests from your housekeeper?”

Severin finally set aside his quill pen. “I do,” he said, handing over a packet of papers before he started straightening his materials and packing up.

Lucien sipped at a cup of lukewarm tea, frowning at its flat taste as he paged through his brother’s expenses.

For the most part Chanceux Chateau was self sustaining, but there were more exotic goods that had to be bought and imported—like spices, tea, and cloth.

“Did you ruin your wardrobe or something?” Lucien asked as he looked at the budget sheet for cloth and wool.

“No. Why?”

“Your housekeeper is requesting lace, silks, and satins by the yards,” Lucien said.

“Oh. *That*.”

“What is it?”

Severin massaged the back of his neck. "A few weeks ago a girl fell through the roof of the little hall."

"*What?*"

"She's a peasant from Belvenes. She broke her leg when she fell. She's staying at the Chateau until she recovers enough to walk. Emele and Bernadine have taken a liking to her. I expect the extra cloth is for her."

"Is she pretty?" Lucien asked, leaning eagerly across the table.

Severin rolled his eyes.

"Is she?" Lucien demanded.

Severin leaned back in his chair, trying to recall the few brief moments he saw the girl. While her eyes were passably pretty her lips were too full and her nose was too long for her to be considered a true beauty. Her bangs were jagged, and although her ink black hair seemed nice enough Severin was willing to bet his horse that Emele had her work cut out for her whenever she attacked the girl's mane. "For the lower class, perhaps."

"Oh," Lucien said, starting to lose interest.

"Her name is Elle, I believe," Severin added.

Lucien paused for a moment as if considering something. He opened his mouth twice before shaking his head. "Peasants," was all he said in the end.

"Is that all for today?" Severin asked, glancing outside the dusty lodge window. It was almost dark, and it was still an hour's ride home from the lodge.

Lucien waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, yes. I'll have your order sent to the chateau. Father and Sylvie send their love, of course. They're both doing well."

"Your Highness," Severin said, standing and bowing to his brother in thanks.

"Don't you have any messages you would like me to pass along?" Lucien asked, still lounging in his dusty chair.

"Please tell Princess Sylvie I am glad to hear she is in good health."

"And Father?"

Severin blackly eyed his half brother.

"Sooner or later you will have to forgive him for fathering you," Lucien said, folding his arms across his belly as he leaned back in his chair.

"No, I don't," Severin said, gliding through the lodge in his animal grace before throwing the lodge door open.

The wind gusted inside, scattering a few leaves across the floor before Severin shut the door behind him.

“Touchy,” Lucien said.



It was the dead of night, and Elle couldn't sleep. Her leg throbbed, guilt invaded her thoughts, and the room felt hot and stuffy. She was dying for a breath of fresh air, or for a noise, anything at all to get her mind off the consuming pain that tore at her leg.

“I hate monarchies,” Elle said, fluffing her pillow.

There was a noise at the door, and Elle had a table knife in her hand as the door creaked open.

“Hello?” Elle asked.

No one entered the room, but something padded across the floor.

There was a snorting sort of panting at the foot of Elle's bed. Elle propped herself up on her elbows, knife still brandished, but could see nothing.

The snorting-breathing continued with the occasional tug on the bed blankets. Elle was beginning to wonder if the chateau was home to a pack of uncommonly large rats when something catapulted itself on top of the bed.

It was a dog. A small dog with a fluffy tail and fluffy ears. Elle recognized it as a Papillon—a dog favored by the upper class for its dainty beauty—but it was the fattest Papillon she had ever seen. Elle didn't know a dog could even *get* that fat.

The dog waddled up the bed, his fringe of fur and fat swinging in the air. He snuffled in the blankets as Elle secured her filched kitchen knife back in her clothes.

The dog made his inspection as high as Elle's face, thrusting his nose in Elle's ear. His tail wildly wiggled, and the dog turned in a circle twice before arranging itself next to Elle's head, its fat forming a cushion.

Elle hesitated before she reached out to touch the dog, eliciting excited pig-snorts from it. “You're...endearing,” Elle said, closing an eye when the small dog whipped its tail in her face. When it finally calmed down its deep, snoring breathing formed a beat.

The dog didn't wake up when the man came through the window. He pried a window open with a knife and wordlessly slid inside, dressed

entirely in black.

“I apologize for my inactivity, but as you can see I have been detained,” Elle said as he approached her bed. “I assume you have a message for me?”

“Your absence will be excused until you are fully healed,” he said.

Elle blinked slowly. Did she hear that right? “What?”

“Your absence will be excused until you are fully healed.”

“Elle frowned. “What of my family?”

“All of your debts still exist, and you **will** return for duty, but for now you are excused.”

“Did Farand say this?” Elle asked.

“Yes.”

Elle stared stupidly at the expensive coverlet while the man walked back to the window. “So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

He shrugged. “Think of it as a holiday,” he suggested. “I will remain on duty. If you should need me, you know the signal,” he said, slipping out of the room.

Elle leaned back in her bed. “A holiday,” she dumbly repeated before a brilliant smile leaked across her lips. “Why not? I haven’t been on one in ages.”

Chapter 3

Free to Walk

When Bernadine came for another visit the following week Elle was sitting in bed, receiving visitors like a queen. A tall, impossibly thin woman who closely resembled a heron followed in Bernadine's wake, an unpleasant frown twisted on her lips.

"Bernadine, how good to see you again," Elle said, fanning herself with a lace fan Emele had given her for no reason apparent to Elle. "Tell me, who have you brought with you? I'm dying for company you know."

If Bernadine or Emele noticed Elle's mastery of language increased significantly overnight they said nothing.

"Your name is...Heloise," Elle said, reading Emele's slate when the ladies maid held it up.

Heloise nodded with a stork-like snap of her head and loomed over Elle. She grasped Elle's chin and waggled her head back and forth, inspecting Elle with narrowed eyes.

Emele raised both of her hands to her mouth before stomping a foot.

Bernadine picked up Emele's oddly shaped pillow and whacked Heloise in the head with enough force to ruin the bun the woman had her hair pulled back into.

Heloise scowled at the cook, who shook a finger at her. Heloise rolled her eyes and released her grip on Elle's chin only to meticulously wipe her hand off on her apron.

Heloise twitched her shoulders and sailed from the room.

"It was nice to meet you too," Elle called, snapping her fan as Bernadine moved to shut the door and almost closed it on Duval.

The barber-surgeon dodged the door, almost dropping his armload of materials and tools. A kitchen maid trotted behind him, carrying a small pot of steaming water.

Duval smiled—which turned into an apple red blush when Bernadine affectionately patted his cheek. He set about organizing bandages and comfrey herb roots before he started removing the plastered bandages that encased Elle's leg.

Bernadine smiled slyly and borrowed Emele's slate. She wrote a message on it and showed it to Duval.

The barber-surgeon grated comfrey root into the hot water and considered Elle's leg. Elle leaned forward to look as well, eager to see how her leg looked without the bandages.

Her skin was smooth but the leg was, in Elle's mind, appallingly swollen. It was slightly discolored, but at least it didn't feel like Duval was driving nails through her legs when he touched her.

The bandages on her arms had been removed earlier by Emele. For the most part the lacerations were healed—only the biggest cuts remained.

Duval turned to look at Emele and exchanged hand gestures with her, drawing a large smile from the ladies maid. The well dressed woman glided to the head of Elle's bed, still smiling as she picked dog hair off the bed blankets—the fat Papillon had become Elle's nightly visitor.

Emele brushed chalk off her slate and carefully wrote, *Dinner party*.

"Dinner party? Who with?" Elle blinked, doubling her efforts of fanning herself with the ridiculously frilly accessory. The illegitimate and sour tempered Prince Severin had never thrown a party in his life—even before he was cursed to be a beast. She could hardly imagine that he had any guests stowed away in his monstrous chateau.

Emele shook her head and would write nothing more.

Elle shrugged. "A dinner party. Why not? I *am* on a holiday."

Duval glanced curiously at Elle before he finished wrapping new plaster bandages around her leg. He then washed his hands and victoriously thrust something into the air.

"Huzzah, you are right to be proud!" Elle clapped. "What is it?"

The stout barber-surgeon nodded and wrote on his slate. *Splint*

"I can move with it on?" Elle said, lurching forward.

Duval tried to push his mask up his face—an impossible task as it seemed the servants' masks were fixed to their faces—and nodded as he wrote on his slate. *A little*.

"Will I be able to stand?" Elle eagerly asked.

Duval nodded.

"Can I walk?"

Duval shook his head.

Only slightly disheartened, Elle leaned back against her pillows.

Duval set the splint at Elle's bedside before bowing and leaving the room.

When he left, Emele pounced. It took hours for the Comfrey soaked bandages to harden. Elle spent some of that time getting her hair scrubbed by Emele. The determined ladies maid swiveled Elle in bed so her head hung off the side before immersing Elle's black hair in warm water.

Elle blissfully soaked in the attention—getting her hair washed was relaxing. However, Emele undid all the good by yanking a comb through Elle's hair, trying to get it to a silky smooth consistency. Emele could do very little with Elle's hacked bangs, but she wove the rest of Elle's hair into a braid when it became apparent that it was going to stay frizzy.

After strong arming Elle's hair, Emele stripped Elle and inventively pieced her into a dress—the pretty blue one Elle saw her hemming the first few days of her stay. Elle suspected it was one of Emele's dresses, it hung from Elle in places that Emele was more blessed in, and the skirt puffed around Elle like a frilled mushroom. Emele then scrubbed Elle's hands, arms, and uninjured leg with damp towels until Elle's skin was rosy pink.

By the time Duval came back to put the splint on Elle's leg, Elle was exhausted.

"I think I'm supposed to be thankful for the changes in today. I want to make it clear that I'm **not**," Elle said, struggling to keep her eyes open.

Emele did not reply and struggled to cram Elle's uninjured foot in a silk slipper. Duval good naturally patted Elle's hand before opening the door to let four footmen carrying an upholstered armchair inside.

Duval scurried to Elle's bedside and clapped his hands as the male servants set the chair down.

"Is someone coming to visit?" Elle asked, propping herself on her elbows as she inspected the fancy chair. "What are you doing?" she said when a footman drew closer. "What is—," Elle bit her lip to keep from crying out when the servant scooped her off the bed and carried her across the room, carefully depositing her on the chair.

The jarring movement made Elle's leg ache, and her breathing was ragged as she clutched the arms of the chair.

Emele clasped her hands in front of her chest and circled Elle.

Elle gave her a closed lip smile before she tipped her head against the back of the chair and released one great breath. "Wow," she said as the male servants arranged themselves around her chair. "It is good to be out of

bed—one moment, you aren’t,” Elle again cut herself off as she clutched her chair when the male servants picked it up and carried her from the room.

Elle was white as they carried her down a hallway, Emele trailing them. The height of her chair didn’t bother Elle so much as the uncertainty. Every time the servants took a step her chair jostled, making Elle horribly aware that she was quite literally in their hands. The servants paused at the top of a marble staircase, and Elle gulped. “Are we...?”

The servants carefully started down the stairs.

Every muscle in Elle’s body was tensed as she teetered back and forth with the movement of the footmen. It took an eternity to reach the bottom step.

Emele patted Elle’s hand and pointed to two ornately decorated doors directly ahead of them. Two maids stood in front of the doors, and they curtsied before opening the doors, allowing Elle’s entourage through.

Inside the room was a giant table... and Prince Severin.

The cursed prince sat at the head of the table. Half of his horrifically feline face was immersed in papers even though the only light in the room was a crackling fire directly behind him.

The prince looked up when the footmen set Elle down at the other end of the table. His horrible yellow eyes never touched Elle. Severin fixed them on his servants as he set his papers down with more force than necessary. A growl trickled from his throat before he picked up a book and flipped it open.

The footmen bowed to the illegitimate prince and then to Elle before leaving the room with Emele.

Elle shifted in her chair, alone with Severin and only the barest light—for Severin’s hulking body blocked most of the firelight from her.

“This is...unexpected,” Elle said.

The prince ignored her.

Elle looked around the room, smoothing the soft fabric of her dress across her legs. The room’s suffocating silence was worse, even, than the lack of sound in Elle’s room. Severin seemed determined to ignore her presence.

Elle shamelessly stared at Severin. She hadn’t met him, or even seen him, in spite of all her trips to the palace in Noyers.

Elle frowned as her eyes traced his beastly body. He was frightening by the sheer nature of his features. White teeth poked past the lips of his massive feline head. His feet and hands were fitted with claws that could rip a man apart. His cursed appearance very accurately reflected his personality. He was, after all, a predator.

Severin looked up, but not to notice Elle. He stared at the door, which creaked open moments later.

In trooped a stream of housemaids carrying beeswax candles, which they set around the perimeter of the room—considerably lightening it.

Crystal chandeliers in the ceiling caught the flickering flames and reflected them across the room, bouncing candlelight off mirrors fixed on the walls.

After the housemaids came the kitchen maids—all masked and silent. They carried trays and trays of food—more than Severin and Elle could possibly eat.

“Emele seems to have given you all the impression that I possess a ravenous appetite,” Elle said as a kitchen maid set a tray of quaking pudding down in front of Elle while another maid poured wine in her cup and served tea. “No harm done, I suppose. She’s probably right.”

When the maids finished they left as silently as they arrived.

Elle shifted her gaze from the sea of food to Severin.

Severin folded up his papers and put them in a waterproof case. He wordlessly took his elaborately folded cloth napkin, shook it out, and set it on his lap before he began serving himself.

Elle followed his example, taking a scoopful of hash, snow cream, quaking pudding, and cheeses.

“Everything tastes heavenly,” Elle proclaimed after sampling some of the dishes. The cheeses were sharp and potent, the rosewater taste of the snow cream was fabulous, and Elle didn’t doubt the wines were priceless and the teas were of the highest quality.

Severin, Elle was interested to see, ate using silverware, making precise cuts and eating tidily. The utensils looked ridiculously tiny in his large paws, but he maneuvered them deftly. Only his wine goblet seemed to give him any troubles as he wasn’t able to get his lips properly pursed against it thanks to his large fangs.

More courses were brought in. There were bowls of lamb stew and fish stock soup, trays of grapes and cherries and pears, beets, violet jellies,

breadsticks, venison, and quail.

“I believe I may require an additional footman to haul my chair up the stairs after this meal,” Elle announced.

Elle was sampling a crisp breadstick when the dining hall door was pushed open. In toddled the fat Papillon. He made a beeline for Severin, barking ferociously. The small dog circled the prince’s chair and snapped at him.

The prince’s cat ears flattened and he briefly narrowed his eyes at the canine before returning his attention to his meal.

The Papillon stopped to breathe for a minute, snorting like a pig as he recovered. One of his giant ears twitched, and with a yip he launched himself at Severin, hooking his tiny teeth on the sleeve of Severin’s jacket.

Severin shook his arm, but the dog remained fastened. He growled as the dog hung in the air. “Heloise!” he bellowed, his voice as feral as a snarl.

The Papillon growled as it hung from Severin’s sleeve, its fat jiggling whenever Severin moved.

Elle smirked openly. It seemed she wasn’t the only one who disliked the illegitimate prince.

“Heloise!” Severin shouted again. “Get this mongrel out of my sight.”

Elle took a sip of her wine. When she set her cup down on the table with a clack, the small dog rolled his eyes to look at her. He abruptly unhinged his mouth from the cursed prince’s clothing, dropping to the floor with a splat.

The beautifully groomed dog scraped himself off the ground before waddling to Elle’s end of the table. It attempted to launch itself on Elle’s lap, but it couldn’t get off its hind feet, so it settled for sitting on her uninjured foot.

Elle pet the adorable creature, and Severin looked directly at her for the first time since her arrival. His beast eyes were narrowed, and his ears flattened.

Elle smiled at him and popped a cherry in her mouth.

Severin pushed his dishes away from him, opened his waterproof container and spilled his papers in front of him. He carefully sipped tea and immersed himself in letters, ignoring Elle.

He looked up only when Emele and the four footmen returned to take Elle back to her room.



“This dog, this wonderful dog, who does he belong to?” Elle asked, playing with the Papillon in her bed that night as Emele shut the curtains.

Emele paused long enough to place her hands on either side of her head, upright, in a mock pair of ears.

“The prince?” Elle asked.

Emele nodded and started fluffing pillows.

“He doesn’t seem to like him,” Elle said, looking at the fat dog. “You are a good dog. Never change!”

Emele nodded before pointing to the dog and then Elle and smiling.

“The dog was hurt like I was?” Elle guessed.

Emele shook her head and finally reached for her slate.

Keep.

“He can stay with me while I’m here?” Elle said.

Emele nodded and arranged the pillows around Elle.

Elle picked up the chubby Papillon, snuggling him against her for the moment. She hadn’t owned a pet since her father’s business failed. It would be fun to borrow a dog, even if it was only for a little while.

Emele carefully removed the splint from Elle’s leg, casting it aside before she helped Elle slide her legs under the covers.

“Thank you, Emele, for all your help,” Elle said.

Emele curtsied and blew out the candles until the only light came from the fireplace on the far side of the room.



After a week of silent dinners with Severin, Duval presented Elle with two wooden poles. Each pole was topped with an oddly shaped pillow Elle saw Emele embroider during her bed rest.

“What are they?” Elle asked, for once not having to feign ignorance.

Duval presented a slate to her. *Crutches.*

The portly barber-surgeon passed the crutches off to Emele. The lady in waiting tucked a pole under each arm. She swung them forward and then stepped off a foot to glide forward, her weight resting on the crutches.

Elle didn't understand quite how it worked, but she latched onto the important fact. "I can walk?" she said, barely able to contain her glee.

Duval hastily wiped his slate clean with a kerchief. *SLOWLY*, he wrote, underlining it several times.

"Of course," Elle said as she hastily scooted to the edge of her bed. It was a difficult task thanks to all the underskirts and overskirts Emele had stuffed her into that morning, but at least Elle now understood why the ladies maid had fussed over her.

Emele dropped the crutches, which fell to the floor with a clatter, and rushed to Elle's side to tug her skirts down.

Two masked footmen stood on either side of Elle—Elle suspected it was two of the four footmen who usually carried her to dinner based on their builds, but it was blasted difficult to tell the lower servants apart thanks to their uniforms, covered faces, and lack of a voice. They respectfully helped her stand, stabilizing her when she faltered.

The world tilted at an alarming angle as Elle tried to right herself. She couldn't put any weight on her broken leg, and she was dismayed to discover that her uninjured leg shook with strain as she stood like a heron.

The footmen shuffled until they were able to prop the crutches under Elle's arms, relieving some of the tension on Elle's good leg.

"This will not do," Elle muttered before she swung the crutches in front of her as she had seen Emele do, struggling to move the crutches against the material of her wide skirts. She then hopped forward and was nearly bounced backwards when her skirts caught on a rough edge of one of the crutches.

The footmen scrambled to support her as she teetered between the crutches and her awkwardly placed good leg.

Emele clasped her hands over her mouth to silence the scream she couldn't utter as she watched the process.

Elle was breathing heavily when Duval smiled and held up his slate. *Practice.*

Elle grimly nodded and struggled across the room with her walking aids. "I will master this method of transportation, I am the captain of crutches—no, the commander!" She thumped awkwardly, nearly tumbling when the crutches caught on the edge of a rug.

Again the footmen righted her.

Elle reached the far side of her room and looked to Duval as she gripped the door handle. “Can I go out?”

The barber-surgeon nodded in encouragement. Emele, who stood next to him, shook her head no.

“I think I will agree with Duval in this case,” Elle said before she pulled the door open, almost taking out one of her crutches with it before a footman lunged forward to take control of the door.

The hallway proved to be tricky. A long rug ran through the center of the hallway, and it was difficult to swing her crutches over its tasseled edges. Additionally, the floor that wasn’t covered by the rug was bare stone—which proved to be a somewhat slippery surface.

“Commander of crutches might be out of my reach today,” Elle said when she paused for a moment to breathe.

A footman kidnapped an armchair set against the hallway wall and slid it up behind her. Elle gratefully sank into it. “Thank you,” she said, managing to plop on the cushion without whacking herself with her crutches.

Emele presented Elle with a handkerchief, which Elle reluctantly used to dab at the sweat beading on her forehead.

Duval smiled and presented Elle with his slate. *Good job.* His cheeks puffed with the size of his smile before he bowed and strode down the hallway, leaving Elle with Emele and the footmen.

“I lost a lot of strength,” Elle said discreetly rubbing at her underarms.

Emele patted Elle on her shoulder before flicking open a fan and fanning her.

Elle briefly leaned into the breeze. “It’s time to try again,” she said after a few more moments of rest.

Emele snapped the fan shut and twisted it in distress before she grappled for her small slate.

Too early.

“It’s fine. I need to push myself. I refuse to be complacent,” Elle said, wrangling her crutches into position.

Emele placed her hands to her heart before she tried again.

Too tired?

“Absolutely not. In fact, I feel refreshed,” Elle lied as the footmen helped her stand. She smiled triumphantly when the world did not spin or

tilt.

Elle wobbled down the hallway, laboriously pulling herself forward against her skirts. She had never worn so much material in her life, and it was throwing her off balance.

Elle glanced at Emele, who had her lips pursed and was still strangling her fan.

“I wish you would have more confidence in me, Emele. I survived a fall from the ceiling, this isn’t going to break me,” Elle said as she marched on, the crutches tapping an unsteady beat on the floor.

Emele clasped her throat when Elle’s good leg gave out for a moment, leaving Elle dangling by her crutches. Elle quickly fixed the position of her leg and thumped forward before the footmen could grab her.

When Elle’s left crutch scuffed on a crease in the rug, making Elle jolt forward, Emele had enough.

The ladies maid stamped her feet in a most unlady-like manner before stabbing a finger at the footmen, swooping it in Elle’s direction, and finally pointing back down the hallway.

“I’m sorry; I am not fluent in that particular gesture. Could you write it—,” Elle was whisked up by the footmen and deposited in the chair before she had the chance to react. They carried her down the hallway in the chair and banged into her room, setting the chair down before she could protest.

Emele grabbed Elle’s crutches and pulled them from her grasp before setting them down near the windows. She fixed a curl that had escaped from her hairstyle before writing on her slate.

Rest.

“See now, I—,” Elle started.

Emele underlined *Rest*.

Elle stared at the slate before looking at her merciless ladies maid. “Fine. It appears I have been beaten today,” she said, settling in the chair as Emele dismissed the footmen from the room.



The next day Elle sat in an armchair next to the fire, the picture of innocence in her cast off dress from Emele. “Emele, is it tea time yet?”

Emele looked up from the embroidery piece she was working on. *Not yet.* She wrote on her slate. *Why?*

“I’m famished,” Elle said, setting a hand on her stomach while looking at Emele under her eyelashes.

Emele bustled to her feet with a smile. *Tea time*, she wrote on her slate.

“Thank you, Emele. You are as sweet as you are pretty,” Elle said.

Emele blushed and swatted a hand through the air to disregard Elle’s comment. *Stay*, she wrote.

“Of course,” Elle amiably agreed.

Emele smiled before she sailed out of the room.

Elle waited until Emele’s footsteps disappeared down the hallway before she grabbed the fireplace poker. She hooked it around her crutches—which Emele had leaned on a wall, tantalizingly out of reach—and pulled. The crutches fell to the ground, and Emele carefully reached out with her good leg, snagged her slipper on the crutches, and pulled them to her.

She had about ten minutes before Emele would return with the tea, and Elle intended to use the time to slip off to a different part of the castle. She needed to practice using her crutches—*without* the easily startled ladies maid fluttering around her like a butterfly.

Elle stood and wedged the crutches under her armpits. She kept her movements precise and unhurried as she thumped across her bedroom. She struggled with the door for a minute before she was able to maneuver it open and close it behind her after she made her escape.

Elle started thumping up the hallway, careful to keep to the rugs and off the stone floor. Based on the view from her window, Elle thought there were a few empty salons—sitting rooms—that weren’t too far away. If she could reach them before Emele returned she might be able to hide for a few minutes and practice.

Elle turned up a different hallway. When she reached an intersection and was deciding if she should go straight—where there was only one door—or if she should take a risk and go right, which would take her back towards her rooms she heard the crash of breaking dishes. The crash of a dropped tray. The crash caused by Emele returning to an empty room.

With renewed vigor Elle thumped up the hallway. She wouldn’t be able to reach a salon, but there was a large door further up the hallway. If Elle could just get to it in time...

Elle reached the door and wrestled it open, glancing over her shoulder when she heard footsteps. They were heavy and masculine,

making Elle wonder if Emele had already spread word of her disappearance to the other servants.

Elle hastily slipped inside, ripping her skirt and almost wiping out when the door closed behind her. Elle leaned against it, listening as the heavy footsteps drew closer and paused outside the door. For a few long moments there was silence until the footsteps retreated back in the direction they had come from.

Elle exhaled and tipped her head back against the door. “That was shamefully close. A few weeks in bed and I am out of practice. Very disappointing,” she said before leaning forward on her crutches, eager to see what room she had walked into.

Bookshelves stood like giants in the shadows, stretching sky high to disappear into the gloom of the ceiling. Books lined the shelves—expensive books with leather covers and embossed spines. The furniture was big and invasively masculine. Portraits of rulers and royalty long dead hung on the walls.

It was the library, and it was undoubtedly the most expensive feature of the castle.

Elle thumped across lavish rugs, uneasily teetering as she shrugged off the unseeing stares of the portraits.

Elle explored until she found a velvet armchair—a larger version of the one in her room—pulled in front of an empty fireplace grate. Elle took small, mincing steps around the chair as she looked for tripping hazards. When she was sure the chair was an acceptable axis to use for her walking practice she adjusted her wooden crutches and took a deep breath before swinging her crutches in front of her. She frowned when she jostled forward.

“These dratted skirts make it impossible to correctly use my crutches. Who designed such foolish feminine wear? The proletariat class would never wear something so irrational,” Elle said, balancing on her good leg as she removed the crutches from under her arms to try and push the puffy skirt of her dress backwards.

Pinching her mouth in a grim line of determination, Elle replaced the crutches beneath her arms and moved forward. She did not take the small, careful strides she had used to hobble down the hallway. Instead she swung the crutches forward with faked expertise before pushing off her good leg.

Sometimes Elle hopped too high—like a frog clearing a lily pad. Other times she moved too slowly and her shoulder blades uncomfortably pinched. There seemed to be some sort of trick to keeping the crutches from moving. Half of the time they slipped when she hopped, and her shoulders hurt from pushing them forward like the oar of a boat. Elle was positive the volume of the dress was making the exercise more difficult than it needed to be. They forced her to keep the crutches angled out.

Twice Elle had to lunge forward to borrow support from the armchair to keep upright. Her underarms ached and the thigh muscles of her good leg burned as she charged ahead.

Occasionally Elle glanced at the library doors, but she never heard another set of footsteps, so she kept practicing.

Once Elle accidentally put her bad leg down. Pain shot through the limb. Elle narrowed her eyes and bit her lip to keep from yelping as she stood still. She shook her head, as if shaking the pain off, and grimly hobbled forward.

Elle was exhausted and ready to face the most likely murderous Emele when it happened. Her crutches slipped. The left one shot out from under her arm when Elle was hopping forward. She landed heavily on her good leg, spinning oddly with one sided momentum.

Elle knew she was going to fall, so she avoided calamity by falling into the armchair. Unfortunately she fell at a very awkward angle and was wedged into it, her good leg straining to keep her aloft.

“Oh dear,” Elle said, feeling her leg shake. She would have to figure out a way to slowly lower herself. Maybe she could slide to the floor and—

Elle’s thoughts were interrupted by the click of claws on stone.

A beastly, hulking shape emerged from the bookshelves. It was Prince Severin. He glided across the floor in his rolling gait, his velvet black fur gleaming dully in the torchlight.

Elle should have known someone was in the library with her. But she hadn’t heard him at all, were her skills slipping?

Elle’s leg almost gave out when Severin stopped next to her. The cursed prince reached out with clawed hands and gently—but impersonally—picked Elle off the chair. He set her on her good foot and presented her fallen crutch to her before he glided off.

Severin left the library, closing the door behind him.

Elle stared at the door, a puzzled frown slipping across her lips. What did that mean? Elle always thought Severin was the type to stand on top of those who had tripped and fallen. He was the master mind behind his inept brother. Helping peasant girls stand was not a character trait Elle would have thought he possessed.

Elle shook her head and limped to the door. "I must find Emele and repent. I really *am* famished now."



At dinner Elle thoughtfully chewed her fish as she stared at Severin. He still ignored her as he tidily ate, reading papers and scribbling notes in between courses.

Elle slurped her tea, noting with interest when one of Severin's cat ears twitched—in irritation most likely. At least he was aware of her, even if it was only auditory.

As Elle took care to slurp especially loudly, she wondered why the prince hadn't sent her from the room. An illegitimate prince was still a prince, after all, and she was nothing but a supposedly ignorant peasant. An idiot, he said, as Elle recalled.

A maid glided forward, refilling Elle's teacup when she set it down. Elle gave the masked girl a quick smile before she selected a few grapes to eat.

"The food is fantastic," Elle said, speaking loudly enough for Severin and the servants to hear.

Severin didn't so much as move a muscle, so Elle turned her attention to the servants. "Really, it is," she said to the silent maid closest to her. "You must give Bernadine my compliments and highest praise. She brings credit to the already honorable occupation of cook."

The maid curtsied with the whisper of crinkling cloth.

Elle smiled at her before her attention began to wander. She eyed her crutches, which were placed near her on the ground.

A manservant noticed her gaze and swept her crutches out of reach before she could make a move. His lips formed a sweet smile as he leaned the crutches on the wall, aware of Elle's aspirations.

"So, this is a big castle," Elle said, folding her hands in her lap.

Severin turned a page in his book.

"It's very nice. It's well... furnished," Elle said.

Severin managed—very aptly from what Elle could see—to hold a quill in his thick, claw tipped fingers and scratch out a note.

Elle shrugged at his indifference and turned to look at her crutches again. Servants were lined up in front of them. All of them were nodding and smiling, looking encouraging as they gestured for her to keep talking.

The situation struck Elle as being odd, which was something she did not hesitate to tell Emele the following day after the footmen carried her outside for the first time since her accident.

“The entire dinner was awkward and silent. He only ever acknowledged me with his ears whenever I slurped my soup or clanged a dish,” Elle explained to her faithful ladies maid as they meandered down the path. (Emele finally trusted her enough to stroll down the level, graveled paths in the thick garden even though Elle’s puffy skirts still gave her troubles.)

“I fail to understand why I am brought to dinner with Prince Severin. Surely I’m beneath his notice,” Elle said.

Emele stopped to write. *Companionship.*

“Companionship? You are bluffing. Prince Severin needs my companionship like a peacock needs horse fur. He clearly doesn’t want me there. I am positive the only reason he does not send me off, bouncing on my way home and further injuring my leg is because of you and the rest of the Chateau servants,” Elle said, walking further up the garden trail. The armchair the footmen had brought her out in was still within sight, Elle felt confident she could go farther.

Never! Emele wrote. *The Prince is too kind for that.*

“Say what you will, but I have experienced otherwise,” Elle dryly said. “What are the terms of his curse? It seems to have done very little to sweeten his temperament,” she said. Little was known of Prince Severin’s curse, even among the Crown’s servants.

Emele shook her head and kept walking. *Not my story to tell.*

“Why not? You were cursed with him,” Elle said, thumping after her maid as they moved toward the outer patches of greenery. They walked the perimeter of the gardens, going down a path that was walled in by giant hedges. A wrought iron fence was snug against the outer hedge. Elle wasn’t sure if it was meant to keep intruders out, or everyone else in.

The weather was pleasant. The sun was warm and intense considering summer was leaving and fall would soon sweep through the

land.

Emele shook her head again but didn't write anything on her slate.

Elle paddled down the path for a few moments, contemplating her next question and occasionally stopping to push her skirts backwards. "Will you be stuck like this forever?"

Emele smiled generously. *No. There is hope.*

"So the curse can be broken?" Elle said, stopping in surprise.

Yes.

"How?"

Emele smiled mysteriously and wrote nothing.

Elle raised an eyebrow. "Not your story to tell?"

Emele opened her mouth with soundless laughter.

Elle and Emele turned down a path, and Emele pointed to a stone bench. *You are tired.*

"I am not," Elle stubbornly said. "But a break would be nice."

There was barely enough room for both ladies due to their voluminous skirts. Elle tried to pat hers down as it puffed around her like a frosted cake, but it seemed to be a lost cause.

"How long have I been here?" Elle asked.

Roughly a month.

"I suspect my holiday is almost over, and I will not be your guest much longer," Elle admitted, her eyes scanning the great trees that stretched above the hedges.

You aren't healed yet.

"That is a fact I am painfully aware of. Soon, though, I will be healed enough that a carriage ride will only be a hurtful experience instead of an injurious one." Elle paused, "As delightful as your company has been I would not be opposed to returning home. There are some family affairs I need to see to," she said, staring unseeingly at the hedge in front of her as she thought of her family. Elle shook herself from her reverie and offered Emele a smile. "Do you have any family? Parents and siblings who aren't also employed by Prince Severin?"

Emele hesitated. Yes.

"Do you miss them?"

Emele held her stick of chalk and stared at her slate. The black of her mask was a stark contrast against her pale skin in the warm sunlight. *I do*, she finally wrote.

“Can they visit you here?”

They can, but they won't.

“What? Why not? Do they live too far away, or can't they spare the time?” Elle frowned.

Neither.

“I fail to understand.”

Emele stood. *Are you refreshed? If you are tired a footman can carry you back.*

“I'm refreshed,” Elle said, lunging off the bench.

Emele led the way down the path. Her smiles were gone and her countenance was subdued.

Elle noted the change and thought it was best to hold her tongue.

They strolled for a while, until Elle's good leg burned with exertion and she suspected Emele had forgotten her entirely and was deep in thought.

Elle would have stubbornly forged ahead, fresh air was a commodity for one with a broken leg, but she stopped and tilted her head. “Did you hear that?” Elle asked, narrowing her eyes.

Emele jumped at the sound of Elle's voice and turned, finally realizing she had left Elle in her dust. *What?*

Elle frowned deeply. “Perhaps I was mistaken. It sounded like someone shaking a bush or branch. It was probably the wind,” Elle said, offering Emele a smile.

The ladies maid shook her head. *No, we must return. I have taken us too far.*

Elle and Emele turned to go when someone spoke.

“Monster.”

Emele whirled around, but Elle followed the sound of the voice and looked up.

A boy sat astride on a large tree branch that draped over the garden wall and hung above the walking trail. He was perhaps ten, and wore the pinched expression of the ignorant.

“What did you say?” Elle said, her voice was calm and her face was bland, but she started shifting her grip on her right crutch.

“That there's a monster, a freak!” the boy said, letting go of the branch to thrust a finger at Emele.

Emele flinched.

“You’re gonna be a monster soon too, since you’re walkin’ with it,” the boy said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Elle lifted her right crutch off the ground. “You’re from Belvenes. Run home ‘n finish your chores ‘for your Ma discovers you’ve run off, child.”

“I’m no child!”

“Go home,” Elle said, turning her back to the boy.

“Those monsters, they’ll suck out your soul ‘n steal your voice. Everyone says so!” the boy called after Emele and Elle. “They’re cursed ‘cause they deserve it!”

The girls moved slowly to accommodate Elle’s shuffling; Emele didn’t seem to notice that Elle was carrying her right crutch instead of using it.

“They’re evil. If you stay with ‘em you’re gonna be cursed too. Monster, ogre, demon! Hey, listen!” the boy nearly pitched himself off the branch when he threw something at Emele.

Emele tensed, but Elle raised her crutch. The thrown rock bounced harmlessly off it, falling to the gravel path.

Elle turned around again and raised her eyes to stare at the boy.

He briefly hunched his shoulders up to his ears before fiercely saying, “It’s a monster!”

Elle threw her crutch. It swung through the air like a windmill blade, cracking the boy in the chest. He was tossed from the tree branch by the force of the blow and landed on the gravel covered walking path.

He coughed and gasped for breath while Elle awkwardly hobbled to him. The boy struggled to sit up, but Elle placed her crutch on his chest and pushed him back to the ground.

“First of all, *her* name is Emele. If you call her a monster again I shall be forced to take my remaining crutch and paddle you like your mother should have when you were little,” Elle pleasantly said as she loomed above the boy.

“Secondly, not only is it inherently rude to break into private property for the sole sake of mocking a person, but it also happens to be a punishable crime,” Elle said.

The boy paled, his eyes growing huge. “You’re gonna have me thrown in the dungeon,” he whispered.

“Nonsense.”

“But yer mad.”

“I am not mad, I am disappointed,” Elle said. “I am disappointed with you for maliciously searching out people to mock and hurt, and I am disappointed with your parents for doing such an ill job of raising you. Such actions do not speak well of your morals.”

“But they’re *cursed* here! They can’t talk ‘n they wear scary masks,” the boy blurted.

“And they did nothing to deserve it,” Elle said. “And I *know* they have done nothing to you to deserve your scorn.”

The boy’s eyes darted to Emele, who was standing some feet away, leaning against the green hedge for support. “She’s *scary*,” he said.

Emele flinched, as though his words were a whip.

Elle paused. She could see how the black masks and inability to speak would be terrifying, but she also recognized it was highly unlikely she was going to teach this boy otherwise. “No, she’s beautiful,” Elle firmly said, removing her crutch from the boy’s chest. “Now leave, before I call another servant to make you leave.”

The boy needed no second warning. He leaped to his feet and threw himself head first into the green hedge. He deftly shimmied through the iron spokes of the fence and fled.

Elle briefly raised her hand to shield her eyes against the glare of the sun. “Emele, I fear I have bad news,” Elle said, turning around to face her downcast maid. “I don’t see my other crutch.”

The confession made Emele smile, briefly. *I will find a footman.*

“I am almost certain I could hobble back to the chair.”

Emele underlined her words on the slate and added, *stay*, before she left.

Elle grimaced and hobbled to a stone bench, sitting in the puffing balloon of her skirts as she settled down to wait.

Chapter 4

Dressing for Crutches

Severin could still remember what it felt like to come out of the madness. It was an experience he never wished to relive, although his memories unfortunately replayed the incident often.

When he had first come to his mind felt bandaged—like fragments of a mirror being pushed together. There was an awful, coppery taste in his mouth, and his fingers were wet.

Crouched in front of him was a beautiful woman. She wore a gown that had the same iridescence as a dragon fly's eyes, and her lips were thinned as she stared at him in concentration. "Prince Severin, can you hear me?" she asked, her voice melodious and soothing.

Severin groaned. "What?" he said, or he tried to say. His mouth seemed to have more teeth—and bigger teeth—than he remembered having.

The woman smiled and called over her shoulder. "Please inform His Highness Prince Lucien that it worked."

Severin groggily raised a hand to rub his eyes, but froze when he realized his hand was covered with fur and his fingers—now thicker—ended with claws that were splashed with red.

"Severin, you need to remain calm," the woman said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You were attacked."

Severin briefly closed his eyes, recalling the hideous witch that was waiting for him in the rose garden when he left the meeting with his brother. He remembered her speaking to him, intense pain, and then everything was a blank. "There was a witch," Severin said, his voice rough and thick.

"Yes," the woman agreed. "She cursed you to live as a beast, and for your household to wax away and disappear with you."

Severin spit, trying to get the unpleasant taste out of his mouth. It was blood. There was more in his mouth and coating his teeth. He didn't know whose it was. His stomach rolled.

The woman placed a cool hand on Severin's head and waited for his retching to stop.

“I injured people,” Severin said, looking at the wreckage. He was still in the garden where the witch had found him, but he could smell blood. There were bodies laying on the ground and medical attendants dressed in white hustling about.

“You did. The witch’s curse stole your mind. You didn’t know what you were doing,” the woman said, her dress glowing in the moonlight. “She made you a beast in body and mind.”

“Why am I alive?”

“Your brother would not give the order for the soldiers to eliminate you. Luckily I happened to be on hand as I was intending to request an audience with you.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Angelique. I am an enchantress.”

“You saved me?”

“In a partial meaning of the word, yes. I can’t entirely undo a curse that has been laid, I’m not that powerful. But once I was at a christening and the child was in a bit of a bind, which is where I learned how to modify and weaken curses,” the enchantress explained.

“So I changed your curse. Instead of living as a complete beast, you are only one in body. Your mind is still yours, it is still human, and it will be for the rest of your life.”

Severin felt his head with his paw-like hands. He felt the angular ears, the flat nose, and the protruding muzzle of a large cat. His entire body ached and was covered with blood spattered fur.

“I was also able to stop the curse from spreading farther on your servants. They are no longer disappearing, but I’m afraid to say they cannot speak, and to save their faces I had to encase them with masks,” the enchantress continued.

“Will they ever speak again?” Severin asked, unable to keep his voice from shaking.

“Perhaps. It depends on you. I cannot entirely undo the curse, but you can.”

“How?”

“By falling in love, by another falling in love with you. Love is a powerful emotion. Working it into the curse was the easiest way out I could forge for you,” the enchantress said, smiling. Severin grasped his feline face with his hand.

“...You don’t look very happy. It might sound impossible, but allow me to assure you that love will not evade you,” the enchantress said, kneeling at Severin’s side. “...Severin?” the enchantress said when he did not respond.

When someone knocked on the door of his study, Severin startled out of the reverie that his memory of the horrific night had pitched him into. He slowly opened his cat eyes. “Enter,” he said before yawning, baring a mouth full of white teeth and fangs.

The door was flung open and in swept Burke.

“What is it?” Severin asked, pawing through a stack of papers.

Burke strolled across Severin’s study, his chest puffed with pride as he whipped out his slate and presented it—its message already inscribed—for Severin’s reading pleasure.

Our honored guest has saved the lovely Mademoiselle Emele.

“She did *what*?” Severin said, leaning back in his chair and giving his valet his full attention.

Burke smiled widely changing the writing on his slate before he stretched his arms out, holding the slate farther in front of him. *Our guest knocked a village boy—who was insulting Mademoiselle Emele—from a tree and chased him off.*

Severin’s cat ears flattened. “She defended Emele?”

Burke smugly cleaned his slate and wrote, *Defended and protected. Mademoiselle Emele says the boy threw a rock at her, but our honored guest intercepted it.*

“How?”

She used the same tool with which she knocked the boy from the tree. Her crutch.

“How is Emele bearing it?”

With the highest admiration for her charge.

Severin tapped his thick fingers on the table until he realized his claws were scratching the smooth surface. “Did the village urchin leave?”

The footmen combed the gardens and did not find him. Mademoiselle Emele and our guest insist the boy fled.

“The gardens are unharmed?”

The hedge at which the boy made his exit is less than perfect, they are otherwise untouched.

Severin licked his chops. “Send for Marc. I need to speak to him of security measures on the chateau grounds. I was inclined to ignore the peasants of Belvenes, but they have forgotten who I am and have overstepped their bounds. It is not necessary for my servants to take brutalities for their stupidity.”

Burke bent at the waist in a bow.

“Do not let my brother hear of this report, Burke,” Severin said.

Of course, Your Highness.

Burke bowed again and turned on his outlandish high heeled shoes to leave.

“Burke,” Severin said.

The fashionable valet turned back to face Severin.

“The intruder. What is her name again?”

Burke’s mask twitched, and he struggled to suppress the smile on his lips. *Elle.*

Severin waited until Burke had quitted the room before he exhaled a deep sigh. The skin between Severin’s eyes ached, and Severin pinched it, careful not to jab himself with his claws.

He hadn’t wanted to ask Burke what the girl’s name was because he knew it would raise false expectations among his staff. Burke was usually dependably silent about touchy matters, but Severin had no doubts the courtly dandy was searching out Bernadine and Heloise this very moment to share his new intelligence.

“She chased off a fellow villager. That is nothing to preen over—she’s only here in the first place because *she* trespassed,” Severin said to his empty study. “This changes nothing.” But Severin knew it would change everything in his servants’ eyes. Rare was the individual who was not terrified of them.

Severin stood and walked to the full length mirror that was leaned against the wall. It had an impressive, golden frame that was obnoxiously ornate, and it was quite large but otherwise utterly ordinary.

“Show me Elle,” Severin ordered.

The reflective surface of the mirror rippled like a pond before Severin’s reflection and the study faded to black. After a moment a new image crawled to the surface.

It was the girl, Elle. She was sitting on a couch, playing with the Papillon mongrel Lucien had given Severin when he first moved to

Chanceux Chateau.

The loathsome dog barked playfully at Elle before he hopped on her lap—disappearing in the poof of skirts.

Elle patted down her skirts to unearth the mongrel. She picked it up and held it to her chest. The dog wildly twirled his tail, rewarding Elle with a kiss.

“Emele can’t we *please* open a window at night?” Elle asked.

Emele fluttered past her, carrying sewing materials.

“It is sweltering in this room when I wake up in the morning,” Elle added, setting the mongrel down when it wriggled in her hands.

“Enough,” Severin said to the mirror.

The image disappeared to darkness, and within moments Severin’s ghastly reflection returned.

Severin retreated to his desk, thankful for the mirror—even if it hadn’t revealed anything particularly startling about his servant’s false hope.

The magical mirror was a useful tool for an army commander to have. On more than one occasion it had saved Severin from making bad decisions, it was one of the only reasons why Severin was comfortable leaving Lucien unguarded, and it had even saved Severin’s life once before.

It was only because of the magic mirror that the enchantress Angelique was at the palace the day Severin was attacked, after all. She wanted to inspect his mirror—which she got the chance to do after returning Severin to his right mind. She seemed disappointed when she saw it, but thanked Severin for allowing her to see it before she left.

Severin hadn’t seen her since.

Severin grimly tucked himself into his desk and pulled papers towards him. He looked up when he heard the clattering of shoes down the hallway. They didn’t stop outside his door—as he expected—and instead the footfalls continued down the hallway until they disappeared entirely.

Severin shook his head. The intruder girl might not be as stupid and ignorant as Severin first thought, but her presence was not a good thing. It gave his servants hope. False hope.

After all, Severin had tried breaking the curse before, and it hadn’t worked.



The following day Elle was in endlessly high spirits. She didn't complain even when the footmen loaded her onto her armchair and carried her to another silent dinner.

"Bernadine is a saint. She is a treasure that deserves to be admired and jealously guarded, isn't that right, Jock?" Elle said. Since the servants couldn't reply and Prince Severin never bothered to acknowledge her, Elle had taken to addressing all her inquiries to the fat dog—whom she had taken the liberty of naming.

Elle continued, "Her hash is heavenly and her cherry jelly is peerless! It is no wonder you weigh twice as much as you ought to, Jock."

Jock breathed loudly, watching the piece of buttered bread Elle held.

"And the pastries, don't let me forget the pastries, Jock."

At the other end of the table Prince Severin sipped his wine.

"It is beyond me how she manages to secure fresh fruits for every meal," Elle said before popping a strawberry in her mouth. It was juicy and sweet from the sun of the day. "She even manages to present fruits that are out of season! Then again, I shouldn't be surprised. The chateau is magical, you know."

Severin made a noise that sounded like "chuff," his cat whiskers jutting forward with the sound.

Elle froze, her bread halfway to her mouth. Did the cursed prince just emit the cat equivalent of a *snort*?

Prince Severin nibbled on a grape, ignoring or not noticing Elle's awe.

Elle looked down at Jock. The dog's eyes were still glued to her bread. "Did I imagine that?" Elle asked. The dog scooted closer on his well padded butt. Elle shook her head before she spoke at a loud volume again. "You can tell Bernadine cooks only with cow milk. It is superior to goat milk—I have been told so by those with taste."

Elle paused to sip her tea. "Good food must always been enjoyed to the highest degree," she said before lunging out of her chair. She almost fell over, but she managed to snatch up her crutches before the manservant who usually kidnapped her crutches could touch them.

Elle rocked back in her chair, holding her crutches with a smile that was considered too big to be pretty. "If we don't enjoy it, we don't give proper recognition to all of Bernadine's work," she continued, as if she had not just held a wordless scuffle with a servant.

When she looked up Severin was staring at her as he chewed his food. His expressions were difficult to decipher on his feline face, but judging by the quirked right ear and the flat look in his eyes, Elle suspected Severin was measuring her intelligence level and finding it wanting.

“Correct?” she beamed, holding fast to her crutches as a maid tried tugging on them.

Severin furrowed his forehead and returned his attention to his food.

One of the footmen who usually carried Elle stood behind Severin. When he knew Elle was looking at him he clasped his hands together and lifted them shoulder height before shaking them in a gesture of victory.

Elle returned her attention to her meal with a slight grin.

No matter how low Prince Severin held her in esteem, Elle seemed to be gaining popularity in his household.



After experiencing nothing but troubles with her dresses and crutches, Elle knew something had to change.

“Emele I have a confession to make, the clothes you dress me in—while beautiful—are making it impossibly difficult to walk,” Elle said over afternoon tea. She twirled a parasol Emele had lent to her above her head, even though they were indoors.

Emele looked at Elle and shook her head before topping off her cup of tea.

“No, I am not being silly. I cannot fit my torso through the space between my crutches because the skirts are so large. I also live in fear that the already low cut neckline will fall further if a sleeve happens to slide off my shoulder.”

You dress in the height of fashion.

“Perhaps, but I have no desire to shackle myself because the aristocrats think women who resemble cakes are attractive,” Elle said.

Emele ate a cookie and ignored Elle’s plea.

Elle flattened her lips as she thought. If Emele would not change her wardrobe, who could she petition for help?

“Emele,” Elle cautiously started. “I need to speak to His Highness Prince Severin. How would I—,” Elle cut herself off when Emele excitedly clapped her hands.

The ladies maid curtsayed elegantly before sweeping out of the room, a bounce in her step and a smile on her lips.

Elle twirled her parasol as she watched Emele go with growing curiosity. She shrugged at Jock, who was seizing the opportunity to try to crawl his way onto Emele's abandoned chair, aiming for her forgotten pastry.

There was a crash in the hallway.

Elle twisted to look over her shoulder, but no one entered her room. She was almost finished with her tea when Emele returned, flanked by four footmen with Elle's usual chair.

The footmen bowed and waited by the chair.

Elle blinked. "What, now? He will see me now?"

Emele nodded eagerly as she plucked the parasol from Elle's grasp.

"It wasn't too short of notice?"

Emele shook her head, her smile still wide.

Elle frowned. "Are you certain?"

Emele sighed and glided to Elle's chair. She took her hand and tugged on it.

"Alright. I'm coming," Elle said, positioning her crutches beneath her before she hobbled to her chair. She barely had time to arrange her skirts before the footmen hefted her up into the air, making her yelp at their sudden movement.

They trooped out of Elle's room and down the hallway at a hasty pace. Elle clutched the arms of her chair as the footmen carried her. Her heart stopped when one of them tripped, but the other footmen corrected him, and in a much shorter span of time than Elle would have liked the footmen set her down in front of an immense door.

Emele helped Elle stand, hovering at her right elbow as Elle shifted her weight on her crutches. Elle set her shoulders and inspected her skirts, settling them into place.

She was shocked when Emele knocked on the door before Elle was ready. The ladies maid jumped backwards, cutely tipping her head and tucking her clasped hands beneath her chin.

Elle frowned at her friend, but returned her attention to the task before her when she heard a commanding, "Enter," through the door.

Elle swallowed as Emele eagerly opened the door for Elle, stepping aside so she could hobble through.

Elle cautiously entered, her eyes taking in the small, cozily lit study. There was a large, full length mirror on one side of the study, which was flanked by a wall covered in maps. The other lengthy wall was covered with bookshelves—which housed an inch of dust and enough paper to run a printing press for a year.

Prince Severin was seated behind a massive desk that was piled high with papers, writing utensils, a compass, rulers, scales, and, oddly enough, a vase of roses.

Prince Severin looked up for a moment when Elle paused in front of his desk. He returned his gaze to his work as Emele closed the study door.

“I was told you wished to speak to me,” Prince Severin said, making a notation on a map.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Elle said.

“State your business, Intruder,” the prince said.

Elle eyed the prince for a moment over the nickname before she looked at the ceiling as she considered the problem. Perhaps she should have thought this through before asking for an audience with Severin, because really there was no elegant way to tell the prince that her petticoats made it impossible to walk.

“Well?”

“I am having trouble using my crutches,” Elle started.

“Tell Duval and he will have a new pair made,” Prince Severin said, pushing himself away from his desk.

“No, the crutches aren’t the problem,” Elle said.

Prince Severin stood and stalked to the map covered wall. He studied it for a moment before selecting a map and tearing it off the wall. “You just said you were having trouble using them.”

“Yes, but the problem does not lie in the crutches,” Elle said.

Severin’s ears briefly flattened. “Please stop speaking in circles and tell me what you need,” he said before he sat down again.

Elle shrugged. “Very well. My skirts are too wide.”

Prince Severin looked up and stared at her with his oddly pupiled eyes.

Encouraged that he hadn’t covered his ears, Elle plunged on. “The way everyone explains it I’m supposed to swing myself between the crutches and set my foot down, but my skirts are too wide and thick. I can’t seem to land between my crutches and sort of bounce off them instead. I

have to lean forward on the tips of my foot—which is quite awkward and rather painful. I keep stumbling like a fool, but Emele refuses to give me a less elaborate dress. Can you *tell* her to give me something less....” Elle held her hand out, grasping for the right word as she passionately looked to the ceiling again.

“I see,” Prince Severin said.

Elle lowered her gaze and tried to gauge the prince’s reaction. He seemed *understanding*? His ears were upright and still, and his feline forehead was free of wrinkles. “Do you?” Elle asked, thoroughly intrigued.

“You find it difficult to move and recuperate in this year’s fashions. I will inform Heloise of the required change to your wardrobe.”

“Heloise?” Elle blinked.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Elle said. She hesitated, wondering if she should attempt a curtsy. As much as she disliked his ethics he *was* a prince, and he *was* letting her stay at his chateau.

Prince Severin correctly interpreted her silence. “It’s fine. Good evening, Intruder,” he said waving a clawed paw at her.

“Good evening, Your Highness,” Elle said before she swiveled on her good foot and thumped her way across Severin’s study. She stopped to tussle with the door and glanced over her shoulder.

The cursed prince was looking down at his paperwork, but he was opening and closing his right hand, rubbing his thick fingers together as if feeling something. He flicked his eyes up and stared at Elle, who unabashedly smiled at him before she pulled the door open and slipped into the hallway.



Elle waited hopefully all night, but Emele did not mention her wardrobe, and the following morning she stuffed Elle into a mushroom skirted dress as was custom.

Elle ate her breakfast in her room and sorrowfully stared through the ceiling to floor windows of her room to watch it rain on the gardens.

“No going outside today, I suppose?” Elle asked Emele.

Emele shook her head. *It is just as well*, she wrote.

“Why?” Elle asked.

Before the ladies maid could write out a reply someone rapped on the door.

“Come in,” Elle said.

In walked the tall, storkish woman who had visited Elle once before. “Heloise,” Elle said, recalling her name.

Heloise snapped her head in a stiff nod. She tucked her arms beneath her chest and narrowed her eyes at Elle from across the room.

The door would have hit her when it swung open if the fast thinking woman hadn’t put a foot out, stopping it cold.

Bernadine bustled in, plump, round, and smiling as usual. She nearly knocked Heloise over with her round backside when she turned to close the door.

Heloise’s lips creased in a frown before she smoothed the bun her hair was pulled back into. The tall woman stalked across the room and stopped at the immense wardrobe that held Elle’s borrowed clothes. She flung the doors open and glared at the dresses with the same scrutiny she had given Elle.

Bernadine waddled over to Elle and Emele, affectionately patting both of them on the hand.

Emele looked off to the window before snapping a lace fan open and fanning herself. Her lips were pursed in a pout, and Bernadine shook her head at her.

Heloise stalked back across the room and opened the bedroom door before clapping. A gaggle of women stepped in, loaded down with bolts of silks, satin, velvet, and other costly fabrics.

Elle stood when one of the women beckoned at her before she started measuring her with a knotted rope.

“Prince Severin told you I require *less* elaborate dresses, yes?” Elle ventured.

She was completely ignored.

Heloise clapped again, and a buxom woman with stark red lips appeared with startling agility for one her size.

The buxom woman smoothed the edges of her mask as she trod a circle around Elle, plucking Elle’s crutches from her grasp. She grabbed Elle’s arm and pushed up the sleeve, inspecting Elle’s bare skin with pursed lips. The pushy woman then looked to the closest maid and pointed an accusing finger at Elle.

The maid descended on Elle, undoing the buttons and ribbons on the back of Elle's dress.

Across the room Emele fanned herself with snappish gestures, frowning as she watched the maid strip Elle down until she was standing in nothing but her linen underclothes.

Elle shivered in the cool air. "Is this truly necessary?"

The buxom woman did not acknowledge Elle's question, and snapped her fingers before again pointing at Elle.

A maid dashed forward, holding a bolt of bright blue silk up to Elle's cheek.

Heloise frowned, and the pushy woman planted a hand on her ample bosom and recoiled in horror.

The next maid darted forward, replacing the soft colored silk with a tomato red colored velvet.

Heloise waved the maid on and the buxom lady cast a free hand over the eye holes of her mask.

Heloise and the dramatic woman—the chateau seamstress probably—reacted similarly to a shade of soft pink, egg yolk yellow, and a bolt of sunset orange cloth. (The seamstress almost stormed out of the room when the women tried an unflattering shade of smog black.)

It wasn't until a maid held up a sample of mint green silk that Heloise and the head seamstress paused.

Heloise pressed her lips together as she considered the color combination. The seamstress darted forward to pull a lock of Elle's black hair over her shoulder and on top of the cloth sample. The seamstress smiled and nodded once, and the maid scurried aside, clutching the bolt of mint green fabric like it was a priceless treasure.

Heloise and the seamstress also accepted a shade of lavender satin, a forest green velvet, and a swatch of blue-gray silk.

There were a number of samples left when a maid darted forward, holding a bolt of dark, rose red brocade.

The room—previously filled with noise of bustling skirts—hushed into the silence of stillness.

Bernadine—who was consoling Emele by the windows—waddled across the room to stand with Heloise.

The tall, angular woman threaded her arm through Bernadine's. The pair looked like old friends, silently encouraging and supporting each other

as they stared at Elle and the seamstress.

The seamstress arranged Elle's hair on one side and carefully held the rose red fabric up to her hair, face, and finally her eyes.

After pausing for a few moments, the seamstress stepped back and took an unused slate. She wrote in dramatic, curling letters and presented her message to the room. *He will love it.*

Elle looked around, confusion wrinkling her forehead as she watched the maids hug each other and beam. They clapped their hands and soundlessly giggled. The maid holding the rose red cloth sample preened as she joined the other maids holding the previously selected shades.

Heloise drew everyone back into order by clapping three times.

The maid with the knotted rope came back and measured Elle again as the seamstress swept out of the room, the maids holding the selected colors trailing behind her like ducklings.

By the time the maid measured every inch of Elle and recorded the measurements on a slate the other women had finished packing up the cloth samples. They left in a gaggle, leaving Elle—shivering—with Bernadine, Heloise, and Emele.

Emele flung her fan aside and helped Elle redress as Bernadine and Heloise held a conversation through slate exchanges.

"I don't think it's necessary to make *new* dresses for me," Elle gratefully taking her crutches when Emele handed them to her after twitching the hemline of her gown into place.

It is, Bernadine wrote.

Heloise added, *The payoff will be ample.*

Elle was unconvinced. She didn't think the prince would stomach spending money on a wardrobe for a trespasser, but he *was* the one she sought out for help. He must have known what his servants were planning, right?

Elle sighed and carefully seated herself on a couch. "I find that I do not care for being ignorant and ill informed."

Chapter 5

Prince Severin the Gardener

A few days later, Elle could not keep a smile off her lips. She was in the gardens with Emele—the inner gardens, the ladies maid refused to go anywhere near the hedge lined walkway where she and Elle had met the bratty village boy—walking with ease and wearing the first of her new dresses.

The design and mint green color immensely pleased Elle. Gone were the loose, puffy sleeves and the embarrassingly low neckline, which now cut off right below Elle's collar bone instead of swooping further down her chest. The sleeves still ended at the elbow, but they were fitted and tight. The skirt was not puffed and required no underskirt unlike the previous dresses.

The dress allowed Elle to swing forward and walk confidently and with much more grace and quickness.

Emele was still off put that her choice of gowns had been removed from Elle's wardrobe. However, even Emele could not deny that Elle no longer tripped, and her crutches did not slide out underneath her anymore.

"Today is a perfect day," Elle pronounced, closing her eyes and briefly sunning herself. "The air is perfect, neither too hot nor too cold. My dress is fabulous, and Jock is getting exercise. Come, Jock!" Elle called, choosing a new pathway to explore.

Jock panted as he hurried after Elle and Emele. The girls wove their way through the gardens, stopping occasionally to admire a fountain or a pond.

"Look at that little pavilion on the other side of the pond, Emele. Do you know which path to take to get to it?" Elle asked, gesturing at a stone structure that was nestled into an inlet of the lily pad covered pond.

Emele didn't seem to hear Elle. She was staring down one of the garden paths, rubbing the rounded corners of her slate.

"Emele?" Elle asked.

The ladies maid didn't reply, but she broke into a grin when what appeared to be a burly red bear trudged down the path, swinging an empty

bucket.

As the walker drew closer Elle realized it was not a bear, but a man. He was an impressive height and girth, and instead of following the tidy, clean-shaven look of fashion the man had a trimmed, wild red beard and short, curly red hair. The beard barely fit below his black mask, and Elle wondered how he kept himself groomed with the bothersome thing.

Jock ran two circles around the bear man, barking and jumping, before he grew tired and had to lie down in the shade. Emele greeted the man with scarcely less enthusiasm. *Elle*, she wrote. *This is Marc, chief gardener.*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Marc,” Elle said. “The gardens are lovely.”

Marc bowed low.

His Highness Prince Severin greatly esteems Marc for his talent with growing and tending to flowers, Emele wrote, her chest puffed with pride.

Marc bowed low, again.

“I see,” Elle said. “I imagine the royal palace does not have gardens half as well loved and tended to.”

Emele nodded, and Marc bowed low, as expressionless as a stone statue.

When we moved here there was almost nothing planted. Marc has worked diligently to amend that.

“His efforts have been greatly rewarded,” Elle said.

Marc, who was looking sideways at the pond, bowed low.

Emele started to write on her slate again, but Elle—noting Marc’s study of the pond—said for his benefit, “I am honored to meet you Marc, but please do not let us keep you from your work.”

Marc nodded once before he bowed low. He took his empty bucket and filled it with pond water. He plunged his hand in it and swirled the water before he turned to leave. He realized Elle and Emele were still present and bowed to them once each before he selected a different path and started down it.

Emele placed her slate over her heart and sighed deeply as she watched him go.

Elle smiled slyly. “You think he’s very handsome?” she teased.

Emele flushed—even her neck turned pink—and she hastily turned away from Elle. She nearly trod on Jock in her haste to start down a different path.

Elle laughed and followed her, enjoying the lightness of her dress and the warmth of the sun.



Elle was sampling her final course of dinner—dessert, which was a delicious bread pudding—when Prince Severin shocked her.

“Are you pleased with your new dresses?”

Elle swallowed her pudding wrong and coughed. She pounded her chest before sipping her tea. When she recovered she cleared her throat and said, “I beg your pardon. What did you say, Your Highness?”

“Are you pleased with your new dresses, Intruder?” the cursed prince repeated. Even though he spoke to Elle he was writing something in a book.

“I am. Thank you. I enjoy the designs, which are more aligned to my personal taste, and their simplicity has greatly increased my mobility.”

Prince Severin briefly looked up and nodded.

Elle waited for a moment before adding. “While I greatly enjoy them, let me say at the risk of sounding ungrateful that I would have been happy to have the other gowns modified to suit my needs rather than a new wardrobe.”

“Do not worry yourself. Heloise and Bernadine informed me new dresses were entirely necessary.”

“Thank you,” Elle said, at a loss of what to say.

Prince Severin grunted and shuffled papers.

Movement behind Severin caught Elle’s attention. A footman and two serving maids stood behind the illegitimate prince. All three of them were beaming and nodding to Elle.

Elle reluctantly returned her attention to her bread pudding, still surprised that the prince had deemed to ask her a question.



“Where are we going?” Elle asked, following Emele down a familiar combination of hallways. A young boy—a groom named Oliver—

was at Elle's elbow. "Emele?"

The ladies maid gave Elle a mischievous smile over her shoulder before opening a set of double doors.

It was the library, but this time the curtains were open and the windows were cracked, letting sunlight and bird songs warm the room.

"It's beautiful," Elle said, her eyes taking in the lightened room.

Emele soundlessly laughed and, in spite of her full skirts, ran down one of the aisles.

Amused, Elle thumped after her.

Emele plucked a book from a shelf and held it open, paging through it to show Elle the beautiful illustrations of exotic animals. There was a lion, golden eyed with a black halo of hair. A painting of a black and white striped horse was on the next page, and a pink necked ostrich on the page after that.

Emele passed the book to Oliver and hurried on. They danced up another aisle. This time Emele selected a book that depicted beautiful fairies, pearly horned unicorns, and roaring dragons. A few aisles down was a book of dress styles and hair arrangements—which Emele naturally snatched. Oliver found a book about knights and snuck it into the pile of books that he carried.

Emele was placing a Loire history book on the growing stack when Elle found a flower book. "Look, Emele, don't you want to read this one?" Elle smirked.

Emele's lower face and neck blushed but she didn't protest when Elle added her book to the pile.

Emele pulled on Elle's crutch and the two made their way to a massive table, where Oliver gratefully set the books down.

Emele spread the books out on the table and selected the volume about dresses and fashions. She sat down in a wooden chair, growing engrossed as she turned pages.

Oliver discreetly swiped his knight book. He started reading it as he leaned against the wall, slowly sinking to the floor as he ripped through the book with the eagerness of a hooked reader.

Elle paged through the book of exotic animals, pausing and reading whenever she found a depiction of a large cat. She was looking at an image of a spotted feline, wondering if any large cats were pure black, when one of the library doors clicked open.

Prince Severin stalked inside, his black cat nose twitching before he turned to look at Elle and his servants. He narrowed his cat eyes until they were golden glints of light. He raised his upper lip in a sneer. His white, alarming teeth were a sharp contrast against the black of his fur. A growl leaked from him, making the hair on the back of Elle's neck stand on end.

Emele gracefully stood and curtsied, tipping the crown of her head to the prince. Oliver scrambled to his feet and rocked forward in a bow. When he popped upright he realized Emele hadn't risen from her curtsy yet and hastily threw himself in an even deeper bow.

Elle remained seated, and was glad she did so when Severin turned away and stalked into the bookshelves, disappearing from view.

Oliver returned to his book, sitting cross legged on the floor and propping himself against the wall.

Emele remained standing, her mouth on the brink of a frown as she stared at the sea of bookshelves.

"Emele?" Elle said.

Emele raised a finger to her lips and shook her head.

Severin reappeared, holding a book in one large paw. He stalked to the doors in his rolling, animalistic gait, and did not spare Elle and Emele a glance when he left, pulling the door shut with more strength than necessary.

Emele sighed and pulled out her slate. *I may have made a miscalculation.*

"What do you mean?"

Emele glanced at Oliver, but he was engrossed in his book. Emele adjusted her grip on her piece of chalk before writing again. *I knew His Highness would be visiting the library this morning.*

"So you brought me here on purpose," Elle said, folding her arms across her chest.

Emele nodded.

"Why?"

Prince Severin needs companionship. He is so lonely he is too empty to acknowledge it.

"With all due respect, Emele, you are utterly mad. The prince has no interest in me, and he has the friendliness of a viper."

You are mistaken. It is not that he is not friendly but that he has no friends. He sits in his study all day, fulfilling the desire's of his brother's

heart. As members of his household we servants cannot fill the void of friendship.

“No one forced him to leave the courts of nobility. He made the decision to closet himself in this chateau,” Elle said, turning a page in her book.

Emele sat down. *He did it to protect us.*

“Pardon?”

The village boy you and I encountered was not the first person to insult me.

Elle stared at Emele, who avoided her gaze. “How many?” she finally asked.

More than I care to recall.

“They are frightened of you?”

Magic makes folk uncomfortable. No one dared harm His Highness, but Oliver was almost killed by a crowd, and Marc was turned out of his house. Emele hesitated, resting her chalk on her slate before she added. *My family disowned me.*

“Emele, I’m sorry. They’re fools, they don’t see the truth,” Elle said, thumping her way around the table to sit next to her friend.

Yes. So Prince Severin came to Chanceux Chateau to spare us more pain. In doing so he has utterly cut himself off. You could change that, Elle.

“You are mistaken, Emele, I cannot. You saw the way he glared at us. His Highness Prince Severin has no wish to further know me, and I am not going to push the relationship.”

It only appears that way because he has been hurt too many times.

“Forgive me if my heart does not bleed for him,” Elle dryly said.

Will you try? Please?

Elle raised her gaze from the slate to look at Emele’s masked face. Her eyes, the only bit of upper facial features Elle could see, were painfully filled of hope. But, in spite of the pretty portrait Emele painted of Prince Severin, Elle doubted the maid was right. Prince Severin *couldn’t* be lonely. He was too ruthless and crafty to have any kind of haunting emotion like loneliness.

Rather than outright lie to her, Elle changed the subject. “I would like to go for a walk again today in the gardens. I very much wish to see the pavilion on the pond. Could we take our tea there?”

Emele’s shoulders fell as she took her slate from Elle.

“Perhaps we will run into the dashing Marc. You should study this book so you can ask him questions,” Elle said, pulling the flower book across the table.

Emele turned bright red and stopped writing. She hastily erased her message and started writing again. *I already have.*

Elle laughed. “You’ve read it before? Emele, you fox!”



A week later Oliver accompanied Elle and Jock through the sprawling gardens, carrying an open parasol. Elle glanced over her shoulder at the dutiful stable boy. “Oliver, you don’t have to stay. I didn’t really want a parasol to begin with, and I assure you I’m not going to leave the gardens.”

Oliver pinned the frilled accessory against his shoulder as he wrote. *Mademoiselle Emele instructed me to **remain** with you.*

“I see,” Elle said, impressed with the ladies maid’s ability to boss Elle around even in her absence. Emele was overseeing the final dress of Elle’s new wardrobe with Bernadine and Heloise. Elle didn’t understand what was so special about it, but she was grateful for the chance to escape to the gardens, unattended. Or so she thought.

Jock bounced around Elle’s feet, breathing loudly and getting leaves stuck in the sweeping fringe of his tail. The dog growled and chased his tail, spinning in a circle before he ran out of air and had to sit down.

“I understand completely,” Elle said to the fat dog before she raised her nose in the air and sniffed. The sweet scent of flowers thickened the air. “Oliver, where are the flowers? I can smell them, but we’ve only seen green things so far.”

Oliver started down one of the garden paths, beckoning for Elle to follow. Elle thumped after her small guide, smiling up at the sun as Jock barked.

Oliver led Elle to an open garden that overflowed with flowers. There were strands of pastel colored sweet peas, colonies of prideful narcissus, bushes of irises, peonies, daffodils, and more. Most of all, though, there were roses. Some were the size of Elle’s thumbnail. Others were as big as her hand stretched wide open. They came in pinks, reds, whites, yellows, even oranges and pink tinted purples.

The garden was a wash of rainbow hues, and bees hummed in the air while tiny hummingbirds darted from flower to flower.

Elle stared in shock, she had never seen so many flowers—so many *types* of flowers—in bloom at once. Everything was in bloom, even flowers that were supposed to bloom in spring and early summer. “Emele is right. Marc is incredible,” Elle exclaimed, breathing in the sweet, fragrant air. “Fall is due to arrive any day, but this garden looks like it is early spring.”

Oliver cheekily grinned. *Not all Marc.*

“Who else does this? It’s beautiful. I don’t think a fairy’s garden could look this gorgeous,” Elle said.

Oliver raised his eyebrows but didn’t write out a reply as Elle explored. She made her way past a bed of snapdragons and admired the chrysanthemums before a rosebush caught her attention. The roses themselves were orange, but the petal edges were a striking red.

Jock pulled Elle’s attention from the flowers by exploding in ferocious barks before running up and down the path twice.

“Jock? What’s wrong?” Elle asked as the dog raced past her. He kept going this time, following a pathway out of the flower garden. “Jock!” Elle said, hurrying after him on her crutches.

Oliver scurried at Elle’s side, trying to hold the parasol above her.

“Forget about the parasol, Oliver. Can you run ahead and find Jock? Jock!” Elle called, turning a corner.

The little dog hadn’t gone far. He was hopping around a set of gardening tools, barking and snarling at someone who was hidden behind a large rosebush.

“I’m sorry—,” Elle stopped when was able to skirt around the rosebush and see who Jock was attacking.

It was Prince Severin, but unlike Elle had ever seen him.

To begin with, he was dirty. His fur was matted with dirt, and the clothes he wore were simple, faded, and ragged. The Prince’s sleeves were rolled up past his elbows, and he was up to his forearms in dirt and mud. A pile of wilting weeds was mounded next to him, and he held a trowel in one hand. He stared at Elle, frozen in the middle of pulling a weed.

Elle stared at Severin for a moment before shutting her eyes and pinching herself on the forearm. When she opened her eyes the prince was still there.

Oliver looked away and took tiny steps backwards, edging away from the stunned pair. He made it all the way to the flower garden without being noticed.

A bee buzzed between Elle and the prince, and Elle finally found her voice. “Good morning, Your Highness,” she said, her voice was flat and toneless.

Severin looked down at the weed and growled, plucking it from the ground with ease.

Elle kept staring as the prince weeded. He seemed different. Maybe it was seeing him covered in dirt, or maybe it was the simple fact that he was *gardening*. Elle thoughtfully scratched her scalp. “The gardens are exotic. I am interested in your garden management, for I cannot fathom how you manage to have all these flowers in bloom at once,” she said.

Severin looked up and jabbed at Elle with the trowel. “Not one word,” he ordered.

Elle blinked. “Pardon?”

“I am not *gardening*. I am spiritually cleansing myself.”

“Oh. Of course.”

The skin on the bridge of Severin’s cat nose wrinkled. “The act of weeding allows me to expel my thoughts so I may work more efficiently.”

“Your Highness. Gardening is not something to be ashamed of.”

“All good warriors must make time to focus their thoughts.”

“It is a genteel and admirable hobby,” Elle said, reaching out to rub a rosebush leaf between her fingers.

“The balance of peace and work allows one to obtain an optimum performance level.”

“Your Highness, allow me to say that you appear to have selective hearing.”

“Stop rubbing the bush, you’re getting your finger oils on it,” Severin said before he went back to pulling weeds.

Thoroughly chastised, Elle made her way to a stone bench not five feet from the prince.

Severin did not acknowledge the movement and kept weeding.

Elle watched and Jock growled twice more at Severin before he retired to the shade of the rosebush to snarl at the illegitimate royal in comfort. “Why does Jock dislike you so?” Elle asked.

“Who?”

“Jock, the dog.”

Severin stopped digging and turned to stare at Elle.

“It’s a perfectly nice name,” she said.

Severin returned to his weeding task.

“You have failed to answer my question, so I shall pose it to you again. Why does Jock dislike you?”

“I find it unreasonable that you haven’t put this together on your own. Hasn’t it occurred to you that he may not like the way I *look*?” Severin said, ripping a deep rooted weed out of the ground before he moved over a foot.

“Oh, it’s because you resemble a *cat*,” Elle said.

“He hates me because I’m an unnatural beast, Intruder.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Your Highness,” Elle said.

Severin briefly pinched the skin between his eyes. “Is there anything you need help with, Intruder?”

“No.”

“Then why do you remain here?”

“Because I don’t think I’m going to get another chance to see Loire’s commanding general weeding and gardening,” Elle said.

Severin growled.

“I’m curious about the roses. I haven’t seen roses in so many different colors and sizes before.”

“I was not aware that Belvenes had many roses to begin with.”

“It doesn’t, but I work at Noyers. I’ve seen the palace gardens, and they cannot compare to this.”

“Thank you,” Severin grudgingly said, savagely ripping out another weed.

Elle fell silent and watched the prince work, sunning herself in the light. After a few minutes Severin finished weeding. He stood, brushed himself off, and picked up his tools. He started to leave before he stopped, turned to Elle, and bowed. He left just as the sun hid behind a cloud.

Elle watched him go, glancing at Oliver when the boy slithered up to her now that the danger had passed. “He is a puzzle,” Elle said, nodding at the retreating prince.

Oliver’s handwriting was awful, but earnest. *He’s my hero.*

Elle smiled sadly as she recalled Emele’s words about the stable boy. “How very virtuous,” she said, placing an affectionate hand on the

boy's head. "Shall we move indoors? I could use a snack. Would you join me?"

Yes!



"Emele, I am not amused. If this is another one of your plans to make me run into the prince I will thwart it," Elle said, standing in the doorway of the library.

Emele, holding an oil lamp in the darkness of the room, shook her head and beckoned for Elle to come closer.

Outside the wind howled and rain thrashed against the windows, giving the evening a spooky air.

Elle sighed and swung her crutches, following Emele as the ladies maid walked the perimeter of the library. Emele looked at each portrait, her face upturned at the life-size paintings of long dead nobility. In all of the portraits the men and women were elegantly dressed, usually holding something of worth—a crown, the bridle of a hot blooded Arabian horse, a lapdog, or jewels. Although the hairstyles and manners of dress changed with each portrait, the expressions were the same. They always had pale skin, pinched faces, and usually their heads were tilted up, looking down at viewers with the air of superiority.

Lightning cracked outside, briefly lighting up the library before thunder rumbled in the distance.

Light from Emele's lamp fell on the portrait of a tall, thin man Elle recognized as the current king of Loire. Next to him, capturing the prince's puffed pride rather well, was a portrait of Crown Prince Lucien. Just beyond the prince was a portrait of a young man.

Emele stopped and placed the oil lamp on a small table that was tucked against the wall. *His Highness, Prince Severin*, she wrote.

The portrait was smaller than the others, and the frame was less ornate. It must have been completed some years ago, for Severin was gangly and fresh faced. He couldn't have been older than 16.

Unlike his father and brother—who had fine blonde hair—Severin had charcoal black hair. A thatch of it hung down over his face, covering his left eye. The rest of it was tied off at the base of his neck. Severin's skin was tan, and he held a sword, but it was his expression that Elle found

remarkable. He looked...haunted. Even as a teenager he had dark circles under his eyes.

*I know you do not care much for him, Elle, Emele wrote. I don't know why, and I know better than to ask. But please, I am asking you as a friend, **please** help milord.*

Elle studied her maid with a calculating expression. "Emele, I am here because I broke my leg falling through your roof. I am *not* the quality of lady that a noble such as Severin would take note of, much less search for companionship in."

But there isn't anyone else. You are the only one who is not afraid of us, of him. You have a true and just heart. Help him, for my sake if not his.

Elle clutched her crutches until the wood creaked in protest. "Blast!" she said, stamping a crutch. "Blast!" she uttered again, glaring at the portrait before growling at Emele. "Fine. Have it your way. I'll try befriending your dolt of a prince. But I'll not take the blame when he ignores me and scorns my presence."

Emele clapped her hands in glee. *Thank you, thank you my dearest friend!*

Elle narrowed her eyes as thunder made the floor tremble beneath her feet. "I'm going back to my room. I want to sleep," she said before thumping her way out of the halo of light Emele's lamp cast.

Emele reclaimed the lamp and hurried to her side. *You are so kind, Elle.*

"I am," Elle grunted. "But I owe you my thanks for the care you've given me. If this is how you wish for me to repay you, I will try."

Emele slipped her small slate into a pocket of her dress and placed a protective arm around Elle's shoulders.

The two walked back to Elle's room in silence.

That night the servants of Chanceux Chateau rejoiced in a voiceless celebration for the remainder of the storm.

Chapter 6

The Invasion

Early the following morning Elle knocked on the door to Severin's study.

"Enter."

Elle slammed the door open with a surprising amount of force and smiled winningly at Severin when he looked up from his papers. "Good morning," she said.

"Hn," Severin said, returning his attention to his papers.

"Set the flowers right here, Oliver. Thank you," Elle said as the groom set down a vase of purple irises on the bookshelf closest to the door.

Oliver quit the room, leaving Elle with the silent prince. "It is astounding that your flower gardens lasted through the temperature drop over the last few days," Elle said, affectionately stroking the vivid purple petals.

Severin's left ear flicked as he signed a document.

"The gardens didn't seem too damaged by last night's storm. A tree lost a large branch. Marc was sawing it up as Emele and I went out to collect the flowers," Elle said, tugging on one of the reed-like leaves that split off an iris.

Severin stood and crossed the room. He picked up the vase, pointedly holding it out of Elle's reach. "Did you need something, Intruder?" he asked.

"No. I thought I would come see what you are doing," Elle said, following him back to his desk.

"Work," Severin said, placing the vase on his desk before sitting down again. The chair groaned when his weight dropped into it.

"You're not going out to see the gardens?" Elle asked.

"No."

"Oh," Elle said before sitting in a plush armchair.

Severin looked up. "What are you doing?" he said, the points of his upper fangs jutting out past his lips.

"I'm sitting down," Elle said.

“Why?”

“Because if I want to drink my tea I need to be sitting,” Elle said.

“What nonsense are you talking about? There is no tea here.”

“Of course not. It hasn’t arrived yet.”

“You called for tea in *my* study?”

“Yes.”

Severin massaged his forehead.

“I apologize. I assumed you would want tea this early in the morning. Do you desire something stronger? Wine, perhaps?”

Severin shot Elle a golden eyed glare.

Elle took no notice and set her crutches aside.

“My servants put you up to this,” Severin said.

“And what if they did? Have you *seen* Bernadine? The woman wields a rolling pin all day long. *I’m* certainly not going to refuse her,” Elle said.

Severin released a bark of laughter. “I should have expected it to be Bernadine.”

“She did nothing of the sort. I merely asked what *if* your servants did.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Enter,” Severin said.

A maid pushed a serving cart in the room, pouring Elle a cup of hot tea.

“Severin, would you like some tea?” Elle asked, picking three walnut cookies off a tray of tea treats.

“No,” Severin said.

The maid curtsied and left, leaving the tea cart behind.

Elle hefted herself to her feet and stood, balancing without her crutches, between Severin’s desk and the tea cart. She placed the porcelain plate with the walnut cookies on Severin’s desk before sitting down again.

Severin glanced at the cookies and stared at Elle.

“What?” Elle said, adding sugar to her tea. “There’s no need to pretend. I know you have a soft spot for that particular kind of cookie.”

Severin narrowed his eyes at Elle. “How do you know?”

“Your Highness, give me some credit. We have dined together for some weeks now. There is no one to talk to during our meals except for an overweight dog. I will have noticed *some* things about you.”

Severin grudgingly crunched on a cookie while Elle stirred her tea.

Elle watched as the prince immersed himself in work. She quietly poured another cup of tea and added cream to it before she unobtrusively stood and placed it by his plate—adding another cookie to it while she was standing.

Elle smiled in victory when some minutes later Severin mindlessly reached for the tea cup and drank from it. He set it down and continued with his work.

Elle quietly crunched on treats and drank her tea. Although Emele would probably be surprised to see Elle's attempt to prod Severin from his self imposed exile, Elle was selecting a winning strategy rather than a conventional one. She never did anything by halves. She told Emele she would do her best, and she would. The best way to befriend His Illegitimate Highness Prince Severin, Elle decided based on his personality and her observations, was to be as inconspicuous as possible as she steadily invaded his life.

The prince wouldn't notice her complete invasion until it had already passed.

Elle smiled like a pleased feline as she leaned back in her chair and watched Severin sip his tea.



"Brother, you are a sight for sore eyes," Lucien greeted Severin at their next meeting.

"Your Highness," Severin said bowing to his half brother.

"Father's been a regular pain. He wants me to marry the Arcainia princess. I told him such an arrangement would be entirely unnecessary if we invaded the country and took it over. He disagreed. Violently," Lucien complained as he draped himself in a chair.

"I find myself in the rare position of agreeing with His Majesty," Severin said, unpacking a saddle pack.

"You would," Lucien complained. "However, you don't know the princess. Her seven brothers dote on her but she's not even a real princess. The royal family *adopted* her. She's a dreadful bore. I'm told she reads books, tours her lands, and is involved with Arcainia's finance department."

"Most would mark those as admirable traits in a monarch, Lucien," Severin said, unrolling a map.

“But in a woman?” Lucien complained.

“If you only marry for beauty you are going to find yourself regretful in your old age,” Severin advised, growling when he opened the last of his saddle bags. He pulled out a long stemmed lily and glared at the orange blossom.

Lucien raised his eyebrows at the flower. “Is one of your servants trying to subtly let you know you need to bathe more?”

“Elle,” Severin growled.

“Ah, your injured guest,” Lucien recalled. “You haven’t kicked her out yet?”

Severin eyed the flower, able to pick out the flat spot where Elle had, no doubt, rubbed the petal between her fingers. “Duval claims she is too injured to move, although she is able to hobble around the chateau with crutches.”

“It’s a shame she’s not pretty. Can her looks be improved?”

“No. Her too big lips house a too big mouth that she opens all too much,” Severin grunted. “Although she no longer looks like a drown rat as she is not wearing cast off dresses from one of my female servants.”

“Fabulous,” Lucien dryly said, placing his feet on the edge of a dusty table.

Severin set the lily aside and uncorked an inkwell. “Have you established contact with Ranger Seventy Eight?”

“I have,” Lucien said, smiling at the manservant who poured him a glass of wine.

“And? What did he say?”

“There was an altercation, but it is under control. Seventy Eight is still on my mission and will not be available for some weeks. Ranger Ten returned from his long term assignment, though. I have his report right here,” Lucien said, setting his goblet down to reach into his royal blue waistcoat and pull out a handful of folded papers.

“Excellent,” Severin said, briefly reading the first few lines of the report. “He says the south borders are inactive.”

“As they should be,” Lucien said, finishing his wine.

Severin shook his head. “Our southern neighbors have more magic in their lands than the rest of our allies.”

“You distrust magic because of your situation?”

“No. I distrust magic because over the last few years it has become unstable,” Severin corrected. “Magic itself is nothing to fear. It is those who wield it that make me wary.”

Lucien shrugged. “I suppose it is that way with all things that are powerful. Do you have your supplies list?”

Severin wordlessly handed over several meticulously recorded sheets of paper. Lucien eagerly scanned them, but found nothing abnormal and handed them off to a servant. “The weather grows cold. We should relocate to a warmer location for our meetings during the winter months.”

“Or we will have the lodge stocked with firewood, as we have done in the previous years. Now, regarding Ranger Ten’s report.”



By the time Severin rode home after his meeting with his half brother, dusk painted the chateau with lavender blue shadows. There was a chill in the air—tonight would probably be the first frost of fall.

Severin dismounted his gelding—the only horse that didn’t turn wild with fear whenever he was near—and handed the animal off to Oliver to be groomed and cared for.

Burke opened the castle doors and drew Severin’s cloak off his hulking shoulders.

Dinner? Burke wrote after passing the cloak off to a maid.

Severin rubbed his eyes. “Not tonight. I am not terribly hungry. I will have tea in my study instead.”

Burke smiled so big his cheeks made his mask bend oddly.

Severin eyed his personal valet before he stalked down the hallway. He rubbed his shoulders, which were stiff with immobility and the cold, and made his way to his study—Burke fluttering behind him like a showy bird.

When he reached his private study he opened it. A steaming cup of cider was arranged next to a bowl of soup. There was a crusty roll slathered in butter, a small bowl of turnips, and a cooked apple. There was a fire in the fireplace, and the room was warm and cozy.

Most surprising, though, was the girl. When Severin entered his study Elle—who stood in front of the window—turned to face him and nodded in greeting. “I thought you might like something warm to eat after your journey,” she said.

She smiled slyly when Severin suspiciously eyed her.

Burke bowed with a fancy flourish—Severin wasn't sure exactly whom the valet was bowing to—and left.

Elle thumped her way across the room, and Severin was forced to grudgingly admit that she did move a great deal easier in her simple dresses than in Emele's frills and layers.

The peasant girl sat down in an armchair and started paging through a book.

Severin walked to his desk and sat. He stirred his soup and sniffed the spiced cider before glancing at Elle.

She turned a page in her book and didn't look up.

Severin took a sip of the warm cider and swallowed. His shoulders loosened and he relaxed in his chair as he took another sip before picking up the roll.

The room was quiet, except for the clinks of Severin's silverware and the occasionally swish of Elle turning a page.



The following day Elle stood in front of a set of marble stairs, glaring at them. Emele was gone—she said she had work to do and couldn't entertain Elle. Rather than giving Elle free rein of the floor Elle's bedroom was on, Emele browbeat the footmen into carrying Elle to the main floor.

This was rather uncharitable, for the only room—besides the kitchen, and Elle was going to stay far away from Bernadine's kingdom—on the main floor was the dining room. Elle could not go outside—for there were steps directly outside the doors, nor could she reach the upper floors because of the stairs. She was boxed in, thwarted by several dozen slabs of marble.

“Are you hoping to accomplish something by glaring at the stairs?”

Elle turned around at the sound of the familiar voice—the only voice in the castle besides her own. “I cannot climb or descend stairs, Your Highness,” Elle said, dipping her head to Prince Severin.

“And you hope to change that situation by glaring.”

“No. I was mentally stewing. Emele had me brought here and as a result has corralled me in with the experience of a shepherd.”

“I see,” Severin said, moving to go around Elle.

Elle flattened her lips in displeasure as Severin climbed the first step. She was going to be trapped on the first floor all day if she didn't do

something. It was that desperation that made Elle call out, “Your Highness?”

Severin stopped climbing the stairs.

“Your servants are unwilling to carry me to another part of the chateau lest they encounter Emele’s wrath,” Elle started.

Severin turned around and tilted his head. He looked past Elle as his cat ears flicked.

“Could you ask them to carry me upstairs? Please,” Elle said, swinging herself to the base of the staircase.

Severin narrowed his eyes and his nose twitched.

“...Your Highness?” Elle said, wondering if he had come down with another case of selective hearing.

“Quiet,” Severin said, his voice barely above a growl.

Elle turned around to see what the cursed prince was staring at, but no one was there. She could hear the faint tap of footsteps, but that was all.

Severin exhaled a hiss of air and his ears went flat. He dropped his golden gaze to Elle before glancing past her again. He descended the stairs and spoke in a guttural voice. “Hold on.”

“Pardon, wha—,” Elle almost shrieked when the prince abruptly picked her up.

“Quiet,” he hissed, glancing over his shoulder as he tossed Elle across his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Elle grimaced. “My leg.”

Severin growled but shifted Elle on his back. They scuffled until Elle was arranged in a position devoid of pain. Her arms were thrown around his massive shoulders, and her uninjured leg was pressed into his side. He held her good foot in one paw that was twisted behind his back, letting Elle stand up in a fashion. Her crutches were wedged under the arm that held her foot.

“Good?” Severin whispered as the footsteps grew louder.

“Yes,” Elle said, changing her grip on his shoulders. “Although even I must admit this is most scandal—,” Elle broke off when Severin bounded up the stairs, moving smoothly but with greater agility than he had previously displayed. He loped up the walkway that made a perimeter around the room—bending forward and pushing off the ground with his free hand to help balance himself as he ran. He darted behind a hanging tapestry.

“Do not speak a word,” Severin growled, his eyes glowing in the shadow of the tapestry.

Elle held her tongue and hauled herself further up his shoulders so she too could peer around the tapestry when the prince inched his head out from behind it.

Elle had just enough time to see plump Bernadine exit the long corridor that led to the kitchens before Severin heaved himself behind the tapestry.

The sudden motion jostled Elle, making her fall against Severin’s thick neck. The black fur on the prince’s neck tickled Elle’s nose, and she took in a squeak of air before clapping her hand over her nose and holding her breath to keep in a sneeze. Her lungs burned and time seemed to stretch on until there were footsteps again. This time the footsteps grew softer as they retreated.

Severin peered around the edge of the tapestry, Bernadine was gone.

Elle unclamped her nose and sneezed three times. “That was telling,” Elle said, blinking her watering eyes before she wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“If you wipe your hand on me you will regret it,” Severin said.

Elle sneezed again. “Bernadine?”

“Only a fool would not fear her,” Severin said, emerging from behind the tapestry.

“I would have thought Heloise would be a bigger threat,” Elle said.

“Heloise is a bear when it comes to budgeting and household supplies, but it is Bernadine who leads my servants like they are her personal army,” Severin said. “She greatly influences their morale and thought process.”

“Who would have thought a plump cook could be so dangerous?” Elle said, planting her forearm on Severin’s broad shoulders before pushing herself up to rearrange her broken leg.

Severin started down the hallway, his gait rocking Elle back and forth like she was in a cradle. “I will take you to the Rose Salon, you can find your way to whatever room you desire from there,” Severin stated more then asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Your Highness,” Elle said as the prince walked up a corridor. He paused at a set of double doors and opened one, sliding inside.

The Rose Salon was built overlooking a rose garden. The far side of the room was lined with windows and two glass doors that opened up into the gardens. It was decorated in dusty hues of pink and orange. The furniture was exquisite and the ceiling was covered in a painted fresco. The room was warmed by the sun, although Elle suspected it was chilly in the winter and required a fire.

Severin removed Elle from his back, handing her crutches back to her. "If Emele has you carried back downstairs you are on your own," he warned.

Elle smiled like a satiated cat. "Do not worry about me, Your Highness. I'll be fine."

Severin shrugged his shoulders and exited the Rose Salon. He was back a moment later. "You will tell no one I carried you?"

"You have my absolute discretion," Elle said.

Severin exhaled a chuff of air that might have been a cat laugh before he left again.

Elle listened to his claws click as he walked down the hallway before disappearing from her hearing range. "That was certainly educational. He is afraid of his cook, how unexpected." Elle said, a bemused smile on her lips. She glanced over her shoulder at the rose garden before following Severin's example and quitting the room.



Elle wasn't exactly surprised when Emele dragged her out to the gardens. It was windy and cloudy, and to attest to the weather's coldness the morning frost hadn't melted yet. Both girls wore suede mitts and fur lined cloaks with the hoods pulled up.

On such a biting day Emele would normally declare the outdoors off limits and force Elle to stay inside. However, everyone knew that snow would soon blanket the countryside. As such the gardeners were out in full force, covering rose bushes, pulling and removing dead greenery, raking leaves, and planting bulbs for the following year.

It would be one of the last chances Emele had to visit Marc in the gardens, and she wasn't going to waste it, but she couldn't go see him alone either. Thus, on this particularly raw and cold day, Elle found herself outside.

“Where is Marc?” Elle asked, pulling down on the fabric of her hood to make it snug against her face.

Emele blinked innocently. *I do not know. Why do you ask?* Her handwriting was not quite as elegant as usual as she struggled to write with her gloved fingers.

“Because as invigorating as this weather is, I would like to find him so you can carry out your tete-a-tete before we freeze,” Elle said, pausing to fix the position of the crutch under her right arm.

I suspect he is in the rose garden, Emele wrote.

“Excellent, then let us go to the rose garden,” Elle said, leaves crackled under her feet as she followed Emele down a walkway.

They reached the garden in record time. Most of the beautiful flowers were gone, with the exception of a few hardier varieties of wild roses. Many of the bushes were wrapped in rough burlap, and the fountain in the center of the garden was drained and dry.

The wind howled, making Elle yelp when it gusted up her cloak and pulled on her skirts. A bear popped out from behind a hedge—although on closer inspection Elle could see it was Marc dressed in a fur coat.

The burly gardener bowed to Elle and Emele. “Good morning,” Elle said, looking around the garden. “Emele and I were coming to bid the roses farewell this year, although it looks like we are too late.”

Marc bowed.

Emele drew closer to Marc, writing on her slate. *The preparations necessary to carry the garden through the winter are positively astounding. You know your trade well.*

The well bundled man bowed.

“I agree with Emele,” Elle said, wriggling her nose to try and return some feeling to it. “I can’t imagine how much work it takes to prepare the rose garden.”

Emele wrote again. *How many more days do you think it will take?*

Marc was finally forced to dig out his slate and write out a reply. His handwriting was straight and boxy, but meticulous. *As many days as we can fit before the first snow.*

Is there any work to be done in the kitchen gardens? Emele asked.

I do not know, Marc simply wrote.

The kitchen staff is responsible for those gardens?

Yes.

Elle watched the pair with an amused smile before she rubbed her red nose and started walking the perimeter of the garden to keep warm.

Even if the flowers were gone the garden was surprisingly green. The walk was pleasant, despite the cold. Elle glanced over her shoulder—Emele and Marc were still exchanging slates—before she hobbled around a corner and almost slammed into Prince Severin.

As freezing as it was, the prince wore only a waistcoat, and he was shoeless. He did not seem to notice the frosty temperature, although an eye twitch gave away his awareness of Elle's arrival.

"Good morning, Your Highness," Elle said in a sing song voice.

Severin set his trowel aside long enough to give Elle a flat look before he went back to scraping compost on top of flowerbeds. "Is the chateau so boring that you are forced to seek out entertainment in the grounds on such a miserable day, Intruder?" he dryly asked.

"I wouldn't call it a miserable day. It may be cold, but one could call it refreshing," Elle said.

Severin snorted.

"Besides, can you really say it is miserable when you only wear a waistcoat?" Elle asked.

"I have no need for further coverage. My fur keeps me well insulated," Severin said.

"Really?" Elle asked, a delighted smile, flashing across her face.

"No, it is not at all like a cat," Severin said, accurately able to guess her thoughts.

Rather than deny the accusation in his voice, Elle leaned back to peer at Emele and Marc. The two servants had moved so they were huddled behind a hedge to block the wind. "They are adorable," she said.

Severin grunted. "Who?"

"Emele and your head gardener," Elle said.

Severin briefly looked up. "What?"

"Emele is quite smitten with him."

Severin stood and joined Elle in standing in the pathway. He exhaled a puff of silvery mist. "Oh," he said before crouching down again and returning to his gardening.

"That's all you can say? 'oh?'" Elle asked.

"Yes," Severin said, looking up briefly

Elle shook her head in mock disappointment before she swung past Severin to investigate a bush.

Severin arranged more compost. "Don't."

Elle froze, her hand hovering inches from a bush branch. "Pardon?" she said, batting her eyes in the way of helpless wood animals.

Severin eyed her over his shoulder. "You were about to accost the leaves of that bush."

"I would—,"

"Always," Severin emphatically said for her.

Elle considered the statement. "True."

Severin finished his work and stood. "Do we need to send a courier to your family?"

Elle sneezed and rubbed her red nose. "I'm sorry...what?"

Severin inclined his head and shoulders in a slight bow of apology. "It has previously occurred to me that your family may fear you have died, or some other calamity has befallen you as you have not returned home for many weeks."

"Oh," Elle said. "No, that will not be a problem."

Severin, who was in the middle of gathering up his tools, paused. His expression softened as he looked to Elle. "You have no family?"

"I have a very lovely family," Elle said. "I have my father and two sisters. But they will not think to miss me until come Christmas time as I work for the crown and spend my days away from home," she truthfully said.

"I see," the prince rumbled. "But shouldn't you send word?"

Elle shook her head. "It would only worry them."

Severin's white fangs jutted out of his lips when he frowned. "I would think it to be their right to worry for your well being."

Elle fluffed her cloak in hopes of taking the bite out of the chilly air. "You are correct, and they would worry, but..."

Severin watched Elle out of the corner of his eyes. "If you change your mind inform Emele and she will make arrangements," he said.

"Thank you."

Severin shrugged his massive shoulders. "You should return indoors."

"It's fine, I like the cold. Besides, Emele isn't finished talking to Marc yet."

“It will make you ill,” Severin said.

“An hour of the cold is hardly enough to make me sick.”

“Your breathing is labored already.”

“You can hear that well?” Elle asked, her gaze hinged on the prince.

Severin shouldered his tools. “Yes.”

Elle narrowed her eyes and stared at the transformed prince, wondering exactly how well he could hear, and what he knew as a result. When Severin eyed her she realized she was being too serious and let a smile slide across her lips. “Impressive. That’s just like a ca—,”

“No,” Severin flatly interrupted before he turned to leave.

Elle laughed at his exit before she called after him. “It was pleasant chatting with you, Your Highness.”

Severin did nothing to acknowledge the comment and disappeared further into the gardens.

Elle chuckled before she made her way back to the edge of the garden Emele was stationed in.

Emele smiled as Marc bowed, but the ladies maid startled when Elle accidentally broke the moment by sneezing.

“Excuse me,” Elle said, sheepishly wiping her nose when the gardener and ladies maid turned to face her.

Emele clasped a hand over her heart before she quickly wrote. *How thoughtless of me, you must be freezing! Let us go indoors.*

“I’m fine, it was just a sneeze,” Elle said.

Emele shook her head with determination and pointed to the chateau.

Elle sighed. “Very well. It was pleasant to see you again, Marc,” Elle called to the bear-man before Emele hauled her away.

The gardener bowed and returned to his work as the girls made their way to the chateau.

Chapter 7

Sickness and Health

Elle coughed and avoided looking at Emele, who was pacing in front of the roaring fireplace. “Emele, it is not your fault I caught a cold. Would you stop feeling guilty?” Elle said. She sniffled and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands.

Emele wrung her hands, stopping to check the percolating tea infusion of water and dried hoarhound leaves and flowers.

Elle leaned back against the pillows fluffed around her when the ladies maid deemed the drink prepared.

Emele carried a cup of the infusion to Elle, hovering as Elle experimentally sniffed it. It didn’t smell like much, nor did it have a strong flavor to it, but Elle suspected she couldn’t taste well with her head as stuffed at it was anyway. She sipped the drink, downing it at an acceptable pace in between the waffling sniffles of her drippy nose.

When she finished the drink Emele took the dishes away and tenderly brushed Elle’s hair as Elle closed her eyes and relaxed in the warmth of her bed.

Elle yawned, but opened an eye with interest when someone knocked on the door. A maid entered the room, pushing a cart that was topped with a tray.

Unfit to leave her room as she was, Bernadine had made a feast to be brought to Elle. There were two kinds of soup, toasted breads, and a thin but sweet gruel.

“Bernadine is an angel,” Elle said, taking a spoonful of soup. The flavor was strong enough that Elle could taste the tang of the sharp onion.

Emele dutifully sat at Elle’s side, occasionally reaching out to pass Elle a piece of bread, a cloth napkin, or another cup of her hoarhound infusion.

The simple foods were heavenly to Elle, soothing her stomach and warming her from the inside out. “Thank you, Emele,” Elle said, drifting off to sleep after she finished her food.

She dozed, reveling in the warmth and comfort of her bed, but woke and opened her eyes to Prince Severin quietly placing a vase of daisies at her bedside.

“Where in the blazes did you get *those*,” Elle said, startling Severin with her abrupt wakefulness.

“There is a hothouse for vegetables and flowers,” Severin said, blending in with the shadows on the wall.

Elle honked like a goose when she blew her nose. “A hothouse? How do you keep it warm enough? How did I not know about it?”

“The design and location greatly aid in the process, and it is heated with a fire during nights. I would be surprised if you **did** know of it, as it is located in the kitchen gardens.”

The pair was silent as Elle struggled to sit upright in the bed. When she was appropriately situated Elle ruefully smiled at Severin. “You were right, I caught a cold.”

Severin acknowledged the comment by tipping his head forward.

“It’s not so bad. Last time I was ill it was in the middle of a rainy season and I was stranded outside. That was a wretched time. Besides, I don’t think I’ve ever had so many concoctions poured down my throat before,” Elle said, her head lolling to the side. “As much as it surprises me, I think some of them actually work.”

“Duval wished for me to inform you that there is a ready supply of sugar and aqua vitae, should you need a way to stop coughing,” Severin said, gesturing to a tray that held a bowl of sugar, a spoon, and a glass bottle.

“That’s how you found out? Duval told you?” Elle asked, squinting at the prince. It was hard to see him in the dimly lit room.

“No. I inquired after you when you did not appear at dinner,” Severin said, uncomfortably shifting.

“You missed me!” Elle crowed.

“The wretched dog missed you,” Severin dryly said. “I don’t believe he let go of my waistcoat the entire meal.”

“Poor Jock. Emele won’t let him come in my room while I’m sick,” Elle sighed.

Severin shifted when silence blanketed the room. “Is there anything you need or want? Is there anything that would make your illness more pleasant?”

“I don’t think so. Emele is doing her best to make me comfortable. She feels guilty, the poor thing. I am happy that you came to visit, though,” Elle said. “The flowers are beautiful.”

Severin bowed slightly—Elle could tell only because the white cuffs of his dark waistcoat dipped lower. “You are welcome,” he paused. “I should take my leave.”

Elle’s smile dimmed. “Of course. Have a pleasant evening.” She watched Severin’s dark shape slip to the door, and closed her eyes. She startled when there was a thump at her bedside.

Severin placed an armchair a short distance from her bed and settled into it. “You will not require conversation,” he said, pulling a small book from inside his waistcoat.

Elle mutely shook her head.

Severin nodded. “Go to sleep,” he added as an afterthought before turning all of his attention to his book.

Elle watched Severin read, occasionally sneezing and sniffing. The prince stirred only to add logs to the fireplace, and eventually Elle’s eyelids sank and she again drifted off to sleep.



A week later Elle laughed as she hurried up a hallway. Jock scurried after her, barking in sheer joy—although he occasionally stopped to snap at a decorative suit of armor or painting.

“Come on, Jock,” Elle called. The little dog was halfway down the hallway, panting heavily.

A door creaked open and Severin exited his study. “You are making a great deal of noise considering you have just recovered from a cold.”

“I’m celebrating the recovery and the regaining of my independence. One cannot celebrate quietly,” Elle said.

“I don’t suppose you do much of *anything* quietly,” Severin dryly said.

“Correct. Jock!”

Severin winced at Elle’s shout, but Jock ran the remaining distance to Elle’s side.

“Where are you going?” Elle asked as the fluffy dog plopped down at her feet.

“The library. I need some research materials.”

“In that case Jock and I shall accompany you,” Elle gallantly offered.

“I am surprised your keeper has released you. Does she know you are raising a racket?” Severin asked as they started down the hallway. Jock ran ahead of them.

“Emele gave me her blessing to run free. She is occupied, supervising the cleaning of my room.”

“Ah, that would explain your celebration.”

“You should be happy. You will not be forced to dine alone,” Elle said.

“I will not dignify that comment with a response,” Severin said, pulling a chuckle out of Elle.

“If anything, I should—whoop!” Elle said as they reached the main floor and Severin pulled her back in the hallway.

“Avert your eyes,” Severin said, his voice quiet.

“What?”

“The mongrel has found Heloise.”

“I don’t understand,” Elle said, craning to see the housekeeper and Jock.

The well groomed Papillon barked as he flew down the stairs, bounding up to Heloise. The tall, stork-like housekeeper had her hands planted on her hips, but when Jock circled her she crouched and held out her arms.

The dog launched himself at her, and she held him like a baby, tickling his tummy as she stood. A smile, the first smile Elle had ever seen Heloise display, was on her face.

Elle stared at the spectacle. “Incredible,” she finally said.

Heloise reached into an apron pocket and pulled out a tidbit of food, which she fed to Jock.

“That explains why he’s overweight.”

“Yes,” Severin said before again pulling her deeper into the hallway. “Heloise has a soft spot for the mutt. Everyone pretends not to know. She thinks it would ruin her reputation.”

“She does not know you are aware of her affection?” Elle asked, watching the severe woman walk off, still cuddling Jock.

“Yes,” Severin said, waiting until Heloise disappeared down the kitchen corridor. “What?” he said when he realized Elle was staring at him.

“You are surprisingly thoughtful in some situations,” Elle said.

Severin’s cat ears briefly went flat. “*Some?*”

Elle followed Severin when he started walking again. “You are a prince. I have seen enough royalty to know that they generally are not the thoughtful type.”

“I am a general, not a prince,” Severin said.

“You are a prince, Your Highness,” Elle firmly said. “May I speak plainly?”

Severin snorted. “I have never known you not to.”

“You are how a prince should be, mostly anyway, Your Highness.”

“I do not believe I have ever been given such a backhanded compliment before,” Severin dryly said.

“It shocks me that you personally know your servants—and not just their names. You are aware of their feelings.”

“Every good general knows his men.”

“Yes, but I know firsthand that not many nobles see the merit in knowing their servants,” Elle said.

Severin twitched his cat whiskers. “My staff supported me, and continue to support me, in a time where very few others did. They have made sacrifices to be part of my household. I owe them my respect.”

Elle halted when they reached the library door. “You are a befuddling man, Severin.”

Severin paused in the threshold of the doorway. “And you are intelligent, for a peasant,”

Elle made a sweeping bow with her crutch. “I am a rare strain of the breed,” she said. When she tipped upright there was no trace of amusement on her face.

Severin frowned. “What?”

Elle shook her head. “I don’t know what to make of you.”

“In what way?”

“You care for your servants and value them, but you are also ruthless.”

Severin shrugged. “A military leader must make informed decisions. He cannot be emotional.”

“I wasn’t talking about your service in the military,” Elle said, the words slipping out in a voice that was colder than she meant for it to be.

She shook her head. “Forgive me, I spoke out of turn. I hope you find the book you are looking for,” she said, making her escape.

“Elle.”

Elle stopped and twisted so she could see Severin.

“You are correct. I am absolutely ruthless when it comes to protecting those I love. I will sacrifice whatever, or whoever, is necessary.”

“You say it proudly, like it’s something to be commended.”

“Isn’t it?”

Elle raised an eyebrow. “No, not when the price is not a sacrifice you pay. Not when morals are crossed because of it.”

Severin narrowed his eyes. “My ‘ruthlessness’ is a sign of my devotion. I am loyal without a fault—perhaps that is something *you* could learn,” Severin said before entering the library and shutting the door behind him with a bang.

Elle rearranged her crutches. “I could have handled that better.”



Elle picked at her food, pushing her buttered asparagus around her plate. She glanced at Severin, who was seated on the far end of the table. He was dividing his attention between eating and making notes. He hadn’t even acknowledged Elle when she arrived.

Elle shoved a forkful of asparagus in her mouth and thoughtfully chewed. She lost the hard earned camaraderie she had been carefully building by letting her emotions get the best of her and blurting out the words of her heart.

Severin was wrong because of the way he would callously use people for his own devices, but Elle had to admit he wasn’t the cruel, loveless man she thought him to be. And if Elle wanted to repair their friendship she would have to do the footwork. Severin was too proud to help her.

The servants posted at the walls hung their heads, as if personally saddened by Elle and Severin’s row. They perked up when Elle spoke.

“How are the gardens?”

Severin did not look up from his papers and grunted.

The servants smiled and nodded at Elle as she spoke. “Are they fully winterized yet?”

Severin pushed away a paper and reached for a book.

“Emele tells me it is likely to be an early winter. I hope she is wrong,” Elle said.

Severin ate his fish and did not respond.

Elle set her fork down. “Severin, stop pretending you cannot hear me and listen. I am sorry.”

Severin raised his glowing eyes. “For what?”

“For what I said this afternoon.”

“You admit you are wrong?”

“Wrong about what part?”

“Ruthlessness is to be commended if it is for the good of another.”

Elle sipped her tea. “No, that part I do not regret. I was wrong to accuse you of not making sacrifices. I shouldn’t have said that, and I apologize.”

“So you believe determination in securing protection for another is wrong?”

“I suspect what we are disagreeing about is the method of protection, not the desire to protect in itself.”

“Explain.”

“You believe the ends justify the means, yes? As long as the outcome is what you desire—protecting those you love—the way you achieve the goal doesn’t matter.”

“I suppose that is one way to say it. You think otherwise?”

“I do. I would also give much to help and protect those I love, but I would not compromise my morals to accomplish such goals,” Elle said.

Severin sipped his wine. “Then you will not be able to fully protect those you love, and they will die.”

“They’re going to die eventually. We are born to die. And saying they will die because I will not forsake doing what is right is melodramatic. No one is going to come into their house and place a sword to my sisters’ throats and a sword to the throat of the old man who lives next to them and tell me to choose. It is the little things I would be asked to compromise. By making those compromises I would not be choosing to show my devotion, I would merely be taking the easiest path,” Elle said, picking up her silverware.

“I find myself unconvinced,” Severin said, his cat whiskers shoved forward as he grimaced.

Elle shrugged. “I did not think I would convince you.”

“I believe the difference in our stations is what creates the clash of our beliefs,” Severin said. “You will never be called to make a drastic sacrifice for your family, but for my brother and me it is a common occurrence.”

Elle clenched her fork and knife until her hands shook. The servants nearest to her eyed her silent display of anger and looked worriedly to their master.

“Severin,” Elle said, her tone was calm. “You don’t know the first thing about my family. Please refrain from making light of my situation,” she said before shoving another spear of asparagus in her mouth.

Severin studied her as she chewed. “I apologize,” he said. “My words were careless.”

“I take no offense,” Elle said, reaching for her tea.

“Tell me about your family,” Severin said.

Elle choked on her tea. “Pardon?” she said when her coughing subsided.

“You said I know nothing of your family. Enlighten me,” Severin said, crunching on candied fruit.

Elle leaned back in her chair, as if her spine had collapsed. “I am the oldest of three daughters. My mother died when I was young,” Elle said. She had to be careful with the truths she told.

“Your father?”

“He is alive and well. My sisters live with him in the countryside.”

“What profession is your father chiefly occupied in?”

“Gardening mostly, and caring for the hay crop. My family lives on a small farm. My sisters raise goats and chickens.”

“What did he do previously?”

“I don’t understand,” Elle said.

“Your manner of speaking is too educated for you to be of the peasant class. I assume your father had a higher post when you were young.”

“He was a merchant,” Elle said. “He lost the business after a string of unfortunate events.”

Severin stopped eating. “You are an indentured servant to the crown,” he guessed. “The crown paid your family debts in return for your service?”

“Yes.”

“I apologize for my thoughtless words. You have made immense sacrifices for your family,” Severin said.

“You couldn’t have known.”

Severin ate and Elle thoughtfully studied the servants—who were hiding private smiles.

“A truce then?” Elle asked.

Severin looked up.

“We are friends again?” Elle asked.

Severin twitched his whiskers again, this time in amusement. “If you wish.”

“I do,” Elle insisted before she stood, groaning. “Once again I have consumed too much, but I cannot help it. The food is much too good. Bernadine is going to make me as overweight as Jock,” Elle said, patting her stomach before she retrieved her crutches and propped them under her arms.

“Do you like animals?”

Elle blinked. “Pardon?”

“Do you like animals, like horses and cats?” Severin asked, staring at his wine cup.

“I do. Not so much goats. My sister’s goats ate all the buttons off my best dress the last time I visited home, but I enjoy viewing and riding horses,” Elle said.

Severin nodded and sipped his wine.

Elle waited to see if he said anything else, but he didn’t. “Good night, Your Highness,” Elle said.

Severin nodded, staring intently at his wine cup as he sank deeper in thought.

The serving maids nudged each other as they took away platters and dishes and the manservants beamed behind the prince’s back as they tended to the candles and fireplace.



“A stable?” Elle said, batting Emele away when the ladies maid tried to adjust the scarf hanging from Elle’s neck.

“Yes,” Severin said, fiddling with a cuff of his waistcoat. “Oliver and the grooms are not ornamental staff members,” he dryly said.

“How many horses?” Elle asked, eagerly drawing her hood.

“A dozen. There is my riding horse, several carriage horses, and the work horses,” Severin said, watching Emele help Elle struggle into her suede mittens.

“Are there any dogs? Besides Jock I mean.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“There used to be a kennel, but the dogs snarled whenever they scented me and the kennel master could not control them as aptly as he used to since he lacks a voice,” Severin wryly said. “Stay behind me,” he added.

“What’s wrong—,” Elle’s breath was knocked from her lungs when Severin opened the doors. The wind howled and blew, stinging Elle’s bare skin with frigid temperatures.

Severin stepped out of the castle and turned around to pull Elle after him. He shut the door as Elle tried to hold her wildly blowing cloak against her.

“Hold on,” Severin said before he picked Elle up and perched her on his back, the same way he carried her when fleeing Bernadine.

“Emele would kill you if she knew this is how I’m getting to the stables,” Elle shouted above the howling wind.

Severin didn’t reply—even when Elle pressed her face against the warm fur leaking out of the back collar of his waistcoat. He picked up her crutches and hustled across the courtyard, entering the stable with a bang.

Elle slipped from Severin’s back and leaned against a stall while Severin wrestled the door shut. The stable was solid and warm. It smelled like hay and wood shavings, and several horses hung their heads over the stall doors, looking at Elle with bright eyes.

“They are beautiful animals,” Elle said, drawing closer to the nearest horse. It was a coal black Percheron, a draft horse used for farm work.

The horse sniffed Elle’s gloved hand, hoping for treats. He blew on her, puffing warm, sweet smelling air.

Elle smiled until the horse drew back, pinning its ears against its head. It retreated to the back of its stall and placed its butt in her direction.

Elle frowned and glanced up at Severin, who had joined her at the stall door. “Animals do not much care for me in this figure,” Severin said.

“Which one is yours?” Elle asked.

“The only one that does not shy away,” Severin said, leading the way down the aisle.

Wherever Severin passed horses shied or snarled, striking their stall doors with hooves and flattening their ears. The more docile tempered work horses retreated to the back of their stalls, but a team of matched carriage horses all lunged against their doors.

At the far end of the stable a tall horse hung his head over a stall door and nickered. He had mouse colored fur and a dark colored mane and tail. His muzzle was sooty black—as if he had rubbed his face in fireplace ashes, and when Severin opened the stall door Elle could see the same sooty black color crawled up his legs.

“He’s very fine looking,” Elle said as Severin slipped the gelding a treat from his pocket.

“He was my charger when I was a field commander,” Severin said.

“You kept him when you were named commanding general?” Elle asked, tugging one of her mittens off to pet the charming horse.

“I did. He was too old be used in battles, so he was retired to my personal stables to be retained as a riding horse,” Severin said.

Elle turned to look at the other horses housed in the cheerful stables. “He’s the only horse that is not afraid of you?”

“Yes.”

“That is depressing.”

“Their dislike is natural. I smell and have the appearance of a predator,” Severin said, placing a clawed hand on his horse’s neck.

“What is his name?” Elle asked.

“Fidele,” Severin said.

The mouse colored horse brushed his whiskery muzzle against Elle’s palm. “You are a brave and loyal mount,” Elle told the horse as Severin exited the stall and shut the door. “He’s quite furry,” Elle called as Severin climbed a ladder to the hayloft.

“Winter is almost here. All the horses grow thicker coats then. Do you ride?” Severin asked, pitching hay down to the stalls.

“A little. I am proficient enough that I won’t fall, and I can put a horse through the paces. I’ve never owned one, though, and I haven’t ever cared for one either,” Elle said as Fidele left her to investigate his hay.

“Not even when your father was a merchant?”

“No, we lived in a river port city. He conducted most of his business by ship,” Elle said, plopping down on a bag of grain. A tiger striped barn cat shyly watched her from a stall partition.

The draft horses copied Fidele and chewed on their hay, but the hot tempered carriage horses snorted and tossed their heads when Severin climbed down from the loft.

Severin took a wooden bucket of brushes and carried it to Fidele’s stall. He set about grooming the gelding while Elle coaxed the barn cat to her side.

“There is something comforting in being with animals,” Elle said. “It might be that they do not try to *boss* you, like so many people are prone to doing.”

“I doubt you lack that particular trait—otherwise you would not buck heads with Emele as often as you do,” Severin said. He stopped brushing his horse for a moment and raised his eyes to the hay loft.

Elle scratched the cat under the throat. “Perhaps, but it doesn’t mean I don’t find the quietness of animals to be soothing.”

When Severin left Fidele’s stall and stopped in front of the grain bag she sat on, Elle raised her eyebrows at him.

Severin shook his head at her before he raised a thick finger to his cat muzzle.

The barn cat sniffed Severin’s leg before growling. It hissed and retreated to the stall partition, flattening its ears as it watched Severin.

Severin grabbed a pitchfork and crept to the hayloft ladder. His ears flicked as he held the pitchfork like a javelin. After a few heartbeats he thrust it into the hay.

Oliver leaped out from under a cover of hay, casting strands of dried grass everywhere. He lost his balance and tipped over the side of the loft. Severin caught him midair and deposited him on the ground, holding the stable boy by his coat collar.

“Oliver? What were you doing up there?” Elle blinked.

“Emele or Bernadine?” Severin growled.

Oliver hung from his collar for a moment before making his eyes wide behind his mask and batting his eyelashes. He set one hand over his heart and girlishly fanned his face with his other hand.

“Emele,” Severin said, releasing Oliver.

Elle looked back and forth between Oliver and Severin. “What about Emele?”

“She charged Oliver with spying on us,” Severin said. “That woman is nosey beyond her years. I am surprised she has not left my services to open up an intelligence agency.”

“But that would mean she would have to leave Marc.”

“It has not escaped my notice that you seem fixated on the interpersonal relationships of my staff,” Severin said as Oliver shifted his eyes between Severin and Elle.

“It’s amusing. Emele bullies me into doing whatever she wants, but she goes helpless at the first sign of Marc,” Elle said.

“Must all your sources of amusement involve pushing your nose into business that is not your own?”

“Mostly, or it wouldn’t be half as fun.”

“In any case,” Severin said, once again grasping Oliver by the scruff of his coat when the stable boy tried to slip off unnoticed. “The relationship between your ladies maid and my chief gardener is of no concern at this moment.”

“What are you going to do to Oliver?”

“I haven’t yet decided,” Severin said, looking down at topic of discussion.

The groom uncomfortably swallowed.

“Let him go,” Elle said. “No harm was done.”

“That is hardly the point, nor is it at all satisfying.”

“I don’t see the use in punishing Oliver when Emele is the real root of discontent,” Elle said.

“Does Bernadine know you were sent to watch?” Severin asked the mute stable boy.

Oliver shook his head.

Severin’s lips pulled back in a toothy, frightening smile. “In that case you will inform her of the task Emele gave you.”

Oliver gulped but bowed when Severin released him. He hung his head as he plodded to the stable door, slipping out into the howling wind.

“Bernadine will be mad?” Elle asked.

“Bernadine does not get mad, she gets cross. She will be cross that she hadn’t thought of the idea first, and then feel that it is her duty as the chateau dictator to lecture Emele for impeding on us,” Severin said.

“All parties involved are thus punished, and Oliver will be unlikely to make himself available for future spying missions. An admirable job as usual, Your Highness.”

“You are a quick study, Intruder,” Severin said with a fanged grin that was less toothy than the sly one he had given Oliver.

Elle smiled as Severin returned to Fidele’s stall. It was funny how a title Severin previously used to draw a line of separation between Elle and everyone else was now almost a term of endearment.

Chapter 8

A Discussion of Princes

Severin frowned in the gloom of his study as he read the latest missive from Lucien. His half brother mostly wrote of court antics and the newest laws their father had passed. Ranger reports were too delicate to discuss through courier. That intelligence had to be discussed in person.

To Severin's relief, Lucien had refrained from bringing up a pending war. His brother seemed taken with the idea of marching against Arcainia, which was troubling. Even though Arcainia was smaller with a less extensive army, it would not reflect well on Loire to attack an ally that had done nothing wrong.

Severin's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. "Enter," he said, gratefully pushing his paperwork aside. It was too late for it to be Elle—she had just left not an hour ago, intending to retire for the evening—but any distraction would be welcome.

Duval shuffled into the study. He was smiling, but the gesture was wane and his movements were hesitant.

"Good evening, Duval," Severin said.

The barber-physician bowed and handed his slate to Severin. *I have just come from Mademoiselle Elle's room. Her leg is healing wonderfully.*

Severin nodded. "And?"

Duval took back his slate, wiped it clean, and thought for a moment before writing. *In two to three weeks she will be able to try walking without her crutches.*

Severin blinked. "She will be healed enough to survive a carriage ride home without additional injury?"

Yes.

"Does she know?"

No.

"I see. Thank you, Duval." Severin slouched in his chair, deep in thought.

Duval bowed and took his leave, turning around to watch Severin as he closed the study door.

Severin frowned at the leafy green twigs shoved in a vase that Elle had brought him that day. She had run out of flowers, and instead resorted to clipping branches from bushes. Severin could see the flattened leaves the maddening girl had no doubt rubbed. Severin heaved his shoulders up before returning his attention to his work.

It would do no good to think about Elle leaving yet.



“Why do we always meet on the most wretched days of the month?” Lucien complained, glaring at the wall of the abandoned lodge.

“Winter is coming. Every day is the most wretched day,” Severin said, delicately leafing through papers.

Lucien sunk his head into his shoulders. “I feel a draft and my fingers are cold.”

Severin lifted his eyes. “You expect me to do something to remedy that?”

“No,” Lucien sulked.

“Then may I suggest that you curb your tongue.”

Lucien sighed and drummed his gloved fingers on the table.

Severin again raised his gaze from the Ranger intelligence report he was reading. “If you are unable to occupy yourself go through this,” Severin said, passing his expenditures and supplies requests to his brother.

Lucien swiped the reports and carelessly glanced through them. “Why bother? It is not in your nature to ever buy something out of the ordinary—a *pony*?”

“Hm?”

“You are requesting the purchase of a mild mannered but stocky pony. One that is used to dogs,” Lucien said, setting the papers on the table and pointing to the request.

“Yes.”

“Why do you need a *pony*?”

Severin hesitated. “It is for Elle.”

“The intruder?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re sending her home soon?”

“I’m not certain,” Severin confessed.

Lucien cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“Duval tells me she will be able to safely travel in a few weeks,” Severin said.

“I see,” Lucien said, looking at Severin’s supply list. “Well, then, I’ll have one of my men get a pony.”

“Thank you,” Severin said.

“My pleasure.” Lucien hesitated. “So, how does this girl act around you?”

“She is not falling in love with me.”

Lucien scowled and looked away. “It’s the least she could do after you’ve housed her for so long,” he grumbled. “Have you even tried to encourage such affections in her?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Severin sighed and pushed the reports aside. “Because it’s not going to work. It didn’t work the last three times, and I have no desire to repeat those embarrassing and crushing experiences.”

Lucien stared at Severin. “You want to stay a beast, don’t you?”

“I don’t *want* to. I—,”

“But you plan on it,” Lucien said. “Because then you never need to worry that someone will think you’ll make a better King than me, and you’ll never have offspring who might feel like they are more worthy than my heirs.”

Severin was silent.

Lucien slammed his fist on the table. “Severin, I’ve told you before, if people think you’re better than me so be it. You are my brother. I will not stand for you giving yourself a shadow of a life because you won’t forgive yourself for being illegitimate.”

“Your affection for me does not change the fact that I am the greatest threat to your reign,” Severin said.

“But you’re not!” Lucien exploded, standing up so fast he sent his chair clattering to the ground. “Perhaps if you weren’t so blasted honorable and if we hated each other it would be true, but you are my closest companion. Severin, in case you haven’t realized it I can’t rule without you. Everyone knows that except for you!”

“You are a perfectly capable leader, all you need is the occasional bit of guidance,” Severin said as a servant scrambled to right Lucien’s chair.

The crown prince sighed and sank into his seat, slinging an arm across his eyes in an appropriately dramatic pose. “You are as thick headed as a rock.”

Severin returned his attention to his papers.

Lucien lowered his arm and grumbled as he flipped his hunting knife out of his belt. He stabbed it into the table and started carving out shavings, occasionally glancing at Severin. “One of my Rangers intercepted an intelligencer from Arcainia,” he said.

Severin set his papers down. “What.”

Lucien’s handsome face twisted into a wince. “Ranger Forty Five was conducting a survey of Lord Le Masile’s lands—Father suspects he’s cheating on his taxes. While Ranger Forty Five was there he intercepted an Arcainia agent.”

“Where are you holding the spy?”

“Nowhere. Ranger Forty Five intercepted him, he didn’t catch him. He crossed paths with the spy some odd miles from the Arcainia border. He thought the fellow looked too competent to be a traveling farmer—the spy’s guise—and rifled through the spy’s belongings when he had the chance. He found coded messages, nothing he could understand. The Arcainia spy realized Ranger Forty Five was on to him and fled.”

“Ranger Forty Five did not chase him?”

“Ranger Forty Five is an intelligencer, not a Ranger combat operative. Pursuit is beyond his abilities.”

“I see,” Severin said.

“So now we have a reason for invading Arcainia,” Lucien said.

“No, we do not. Neighboring countries all spy on one another, it is not anything worth marching to war for.”

Lucien folded his arms across his chest. “Who cares, it’s a small country. We can surely take them.”

“Arcainia might be small, but the country’s princes bother me.”

“They are cursed annoying. All of them are obsessed with their passions, and they’re about as interesting to talk to as dead mice.”

“No, they remind me of myself,” Severin said. “Which does not sit well with me.”

“You’re overestimating them. They’re not very bright.”

“And yet their agent outmaneuvered ours.”

“That is hardly a reflection on their shared competence. And Ranger Forty Five did not completely fail. The message was coded, but the spy had maps with him.”

“In case you haven’t realized this, Lucien, carrying maps is not illegal.”

“Yes, but in this case the maps were enlightening. They were all of Noyers, the palace, and the land around Chanceux Chateau,” Lucien said.

“Noyers and the palace are not unexpected, but my Chateau?” Severin said.

“Ranger Forty Five swears he saw at least two maps detailing its location.”

Severin rubbed his whiskers. “We need more information. Call back Ranger Seventy Eight from whatever asinine investigation you have him on and send him to Arcainia. He’s the best we have at castle infiltration.”

“I can’t. Ranger Seventy Eight is still indisposed,” Lucien sighed. “Another few weeks, though, and that mission should be over. I’ll have Farand begin prepping the assignment.”

Severin glared at his half brother, who gave him his best portrait smile. Severin sighed. “Are we finished here?”

“Yes. But Severin, be careful,” Lucien said. “The princes of Arcainia are stupid, but there may be real danger if they decide *you* are the real threat.”

“You mean my position as an illegitimate prince places me in a dicey situation as the Royal family cannot be nearly as offended if Arcainia was to off me as opposed to you,” Severin dryly said.

“No, I mean that any one of our enemies with half a brain know that killing you will neutralize Loire’s army. Be careful,” Lucien said, reaching up to place a hand on Severin’s broad shoulder.

Severin shrugged. “If you say so. Take care, Lucien.”

“You too,” Lucien said, drawing his cloak around him. “Stay safe.”

“I will try.”



A man clothed in black left Elle’s room shortly before midnight. Elle watched him leave, disappearing into the velvet night, before she stood to close the window he departed through.

Jock slept on her bed, creating a soft symphony of snores as Elle stared at the silver moon. Her leg was getting stronger. She was finally able to switch her focus from healing to muscle recovery.

She had lost muscle in her time of inactivity, but the last few nights she was slowly able to start pushing herself, performing exercises in her rooms after Emele retired.

“They haven’t told me that my leg is better,” Elle said. “Duval insists I’m still in danger, even though I should be able to begin walking without the crutches. Am I a collared dog they mean to keep as a pet?”

The moon did not reply, but a few flakes of glittering snow trailed through the air, tossed on gusting winds.

Elle watched for a moment before she twitched the curtains shut. “It will be an early winter this year,” she said before retreating to her bed, pushing Jock out of the way so she could stretch out.

The Papillon twitched his paws and ran in place as Elle slipped under the covers.

“Everything was much easier before I broke my leg,” she grumbled.

Chapter 9

A Beastly Curse

“Today I want to go down the stairs,” Elle announced to Emele over her breakfast toast.

I will summon the footmen to bring your chair, Emele wrote after she finished wiping white Jock hairs off a couch pillow.

“You misinterpreted the meaning of my words. I want to walk down the stairs. I don’t want to be carried.”

Emele held a hand to her throat before she scribbled away on her slate. Her penmanship was messy and scrawling. *You can’t, you can’t use crutches **and** go down steps. It would be too dangerous.*

“I won’t need crutches. I can hold onto the railing.”

You cannot move without crutches.

“I believe that I can,” Elle firmly said.

Emele pursed her lips.

“Talk to Duval if you must, but my leg is better, I am sure of it. I just need to get my strength back.”

Emele’s lower lip trembled. *Do you want to leave us that badly?*

Elle reached for Emele’s hand. “You are willfully misunderstanding me today. That’s not it at all. I enjoy it here, but I will have to leave eventually. I’m not totally healed yet, Emele. Today I will merely go *down* a flight of stairs, I won’t go up.”

Emele brushed a teardrop from her eyelashes and bravely nodded.

Elle finished her breakfast as Emele fluttered around the room, anxiously straightening cushions and inspecting Elle’s wardrobe.

The ladies maid helped Elle into one of her new dresses—the blue-gray dress that set off her eyes just right. The castle was cold enough that Elle took a white shawl to wrap around her shoulders.

“I want my hair down today, it’s too cold to pin it up,” Elle said when Emele held a handful of hairpins and patted a chair in invitation.

Emele nodded and retrieved a brush, carefully brushing Elle’s inky black hair until it gleamed.

When she finished Emele wrote, *I am going to get a manservant to come with us as you descend the stairs.*

When Elle arched an eyebrow the ladies maid added, *Just in case.*

Elle sighed. "Very well. Go get one, I will meet you at the closest staircase," she said, reaching for her crutches. She barely had time to stand before Emele exited the room, cramming her wide skirts through the bedroom door.

Elle propped her crutches under her arms and made her way to the door. When she left her room and started down the hallway she moved slowly, taking the time to carefully set her mending foot on the ground.

When she reached the staircase Emele was already waiting there with the selected manservant.

"Hello, Burke," Elle greeted, glancing at Emele in surprise.

When Emele said manservant Elle thought she meant one of the tall, muscled footmen. Burke was about as muscled as a flashy colored duck and would be roughly as useful as one.

Burke smiled brightly before he bowed, the vibrant ruby fabric of his waistcoat blinding Elle. When he straightened up he gestured to the stairs behind himself and clapped.

Elle sidled up to the stair railing. She exhaled and handed her crutches to Emele before placing a hand on the railing. She took a moment to flex her ankles before she stepped down, moving her good leg first. When she was safely situated she turned to grin at Emele and Burke.

Burke clasped his hands and pumped them above his head, and Emele clapped encouragingly.

Elle carefully descended the stairs, going one step at a time. The effort exhausted her, but she gritted her teeth and pushed on. "I won't recover if I don't push myself," Elle muttered, carefully climbing down another step. She was five steps from the bottom of the stairs when her leg abruptly gave out.

Elle clung to the rail to keep herself from crashing headfirst down the stairs, but she would have slammed into the stairs if Severin hadn't caught her by the waist with one arm.

Elle released the breath she was holding but was still stiff with tension when she realized the cursed prince had her.

"Did it ever occur to you," Severin said. "To try a few stairs, call it a success, and end it before it became a failure? Or, better yet, to strengthen

your leg first by *walking* instead of going straight to climbing like a mountain goat?"

Severin held Elle secure as he descended to a stair lower than the one she stood on. Elle threw her arms around his hulking shoulders before he picked her legs out from under her and carried her down the remaining stairs.

"I *have* been trying to strengthen my leg," Elle said, her hands clenching the fabric of his shirt.

Severin held Elle aloft even after they reached the main floor. "Then might I recommend you try more?" he said as he swiveled so they faced his servants.

Emele and Burke appeared to be congratulating each other. They didn't even try hiding their smug smiles, and ignored Severin and Elle.

Elle frowned as she watched her gleeful ladies maid. "Thank you for your help, Your Highness. I am lucky you happened to be passing by."

Severin narrowed his eyes as he too stared at his servants. "It wasn't by chance. Burke was with me when Emele fetched him. The pair exchanged secretive words through their slates. As my sense of well being is keenly tied to the activities of Bernadine, Heloise, and Emele I thought it would be prudent to see what she was doing. Unfortunately I might have played right into her hands."

"What do you mean?" Elle asked.

"Nothing. Emele, are you going to leave us standing here all day, or will you bring the crutches down?" Severin said, his voice was clear and piercing.

Emele sashayed down the stairs, sweetly presenting Elle's crutches to her when Severin gently set her down.

Elle took the crutches and propped them under her arms. "Thank you again, Your Highness."

"Think nothing of it," Severin said before growling, "Burke."

The brightly clothed valet saluted Severin.

"I will meet you in my study one hour hence. Do not be late," Severin warned before he stalked across the room and up the far staircase.

Elle watched him go before she turned to face Emele. The ladies maid was wearing a triumphant smile, her shoulders were raised slightly and her skin glowed. She looked, almost, as if she had just been granted the dearest wish of her heart. It was odd.

“Emele,” Elle started.

Yes, Emele wrote as two housemaids swept past, carrying a rug that had just been aired out.

Elle thought for a moment and decided this was neither the time nor the place to start what was very likely to be an argument. “ I’m famished. Do you think we could visit Bernadine in the kitchens and take some refreshments?”

I don’t see why not

“Fantastic! Let’s go, shall we?”

Whatever you wish, Elle.



Elle chose not to confront Emele over her odd behavior until they took afternoon tea in the privacy of Elle’s bedroom.

“Emele, do you care to explain why you are so interested in my interactions with Prince Severin?” Elle asked, stirring sugar into her tea with a harmless smile.

Emele choked on the cookie she was consuming. She washed it down with a few sips of her tea before writing on her slate with controlled movements. *What do you mean?*

“I mean that your insistent intrusions beg me to believe there is more to your reason for asking me to befriend your master than a desire to stave off his supposed loneliness,” Elle said.

Isn’t it natural that I would want you, my close friend, to admire His Highness as well?

“Admire, perhaps. But you and all the servants in this chateau—with the exception of Marc, and he doesn’t notice anything that isn’t planted in the ground—push Severin and I together in the most tacky of ways.”

I don’t know what you’re referring to.

Elle arched an eyebrow. “Oh really? Very well. It doesn’t matter, I expect I will only be here until the end of the week. I will be returning home soon you know.”

Emele panicked and made several curls fall out of the ornate bun she had styled her hair in that day with the severity of head shaking she displayed. *No, you can’t!*

“And why can’t I?” Elle asked, she still smiled but her eyes conveyed no warmth at all.

Emele drooped. *You’re so close.*

“Close to what?”

Emele hesitated and wrote, *I cannot tell you. His Highness should be the one to explain.*

Elle leaned back in her chair and sighed in defeat. “I see.”

The dishes clinked as Emele gathered up the tea cups. *Have you finished your tea?*

“Yes.”

Then I shall return these to the kitchens. I will be back shortly.

“Thank you, Emele,” Elle said.

Emele dipped in an elegant curtsy before picking up the tray and bustling through the bedroom door.

As she had several times before, Elle waited until Emele’s footsteps disappeared down the hallway before she snatched up her crutches. She made her escape, heading in the opposite direction that Emele disappeared in.

“If she doesn’t want to tell me that’s fine. I’ll just have to ask *His Highness* myself,” Elle said as she hurried up the hallway. After crossing several twisted hallways, Elle stopped outside Severin’s study.

“Enter,” Severin said after Elle knocked on the door.

Elle opened the door. “We need to talk,” she said when Severin looked away from the tall, ornately framed mirror he was staring at.

“Then sit down, and let us talk,” Severin said.

Elle set her crutches aside before closing the study door and slowly walking up to a chair pulled in front of Severin’s desk.

“Impressive,” Severin said when Elle seated herself. “You have increased in strength and ability. You wish to depart for your home soon?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I want to talk about,” Elle said.

Severin nodded and leaned back in his chair.

“Your servants seem to have a vested interest in our friendship. I noticed from the onset when they insisted that I—an assumedly ill mannered peasant—dine with you—a prince—as soon as I was fit to. I paid no mind to it, until recently. They seem to be increasing their antics. I want to know why.”

Severin rubbed his forehead. “They refuse to tell you?”

“Yes.”

“I take it, then, that you do not know the nature of my curse?”

“I only know that you were cursed by a wicked witch, and a beautiful enchantress broke off the worst of it,” Elle truthfully reported.

Severin nodded. “The original curse made me not only look like a beast, but think and act like one as well. The enchantress was able to break off the psychological aspects of the curse, but not the physical. However, she supposedly was able to create a way to entirely destroy the curse.”

“How can you break it?” Elle asked when Severin didn’t continue.

Severin rolled his shoulders, making the fur leaking out of the collar of his waistcoat fluff up. “By falling in love, or by being loved,” he finally said.

Elle stared at Severin in stunned silence.

“She said it is because love is the most powerful, healing emotion humanity is capable of,” Severin said, his voice slightly defensive.

“I see. I would not disagree with that.”

“But?”

“But I would not think it would be very easy to fall in love when one is self-exiled in an abandoned chateau.”

“You are correct, and that is why I am here,” Severin said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Severin turned in his chair to stare at the wall that was covered in maps. He was silent for a few moments before he spoke slowly, like the words were costly gems he was reluctant to part with. “I made previous... attempts to break the curse to no avail. It did nothing but bring me shame and break the hearts of my servants when the curse was not lifted. Rather than live in the continuous pressure of misleading hopes I resolved to move here.”

Elle frowned. “And you entirely gave up on breaking the curse? That hardly seems like you.”

“It has been proven to me that this curse can never be broken. Women claim to love me, but in their hearts they love my title, or wealth, or my family connections, but never me,” Severin said, avoiding Elle’s eyes.

Elle’s frown took on a shade of sadness. “It saddens me to hear you say that, though I can understand how you came to that conclusion. Do you have no hope of breaking the curse at all?”

Severin raised his oddly pupiled eyes to meet Elle's gaze. For a moment Severin saw what his servants could see in Elle. He saw the compassion in her face and the way she did not shrink from his intimidating gaze. He recognized the sparkle of intelligence in her beautiful eyes, and her humble, unadorned beauty instead of criticizing the size of her mouth or the length of her nose. Severin blinked and squashed the thoughts like unwanted bugs. "No, no hope at all," he echoed.

"I see," Elle said.

The silence stretched for a few moments before Severin spoke again. "I apologize if my servants have made you uncomfortable in any way, or if they raised... expectations."

Elle shook her head. "There is nothing to apologize for. I was merely curious. It is I who in all probability needs to apologize for thrusting myself into your confidence."

"That is not necessary. Your questions were logical," Severin said.

A quirk of a smile folded the edges of Elle's lips. "Perhaps, or maybe it was another example of, how did you phrase it? Poking my nose in someone else's business for the fun of it."

Severin shrugged. "It is one of your charms."

Elle hooted in laughter. "Isn't *that* a boldfaced lie? I will miss our conversations when I leave this place."

"You mean to leave soon, then?" Severin asked.

"I haven't talked to Duval about it, but I think I will be strong enough this week," Elle said, slowly rising to a standing position.

Severin flatly stared at her. "You are *not* back to a peak physical condition."

"No," Elle agreed. "But I'm not sure how much longer the crown will tolerate my absence without a punishment."

Severin stood as well, looming above Elle. "You have nothing to fear. As little as I like to claim the relationship, might I remind you that I am a part of that family. I will inform whatever steward is in charge of your contract that you are to be forgiven for your absence."

Elle smiled. "Thank you, Your Highness."

"Severin. With all the soul baring we have experienced in this past hour calling me by my title seems ridiculous," Severin dryly said.

"Then thank you, Severin."

"You are welcome, Elle."



Duval carefully ran his hand along the smooth, unblemished skin of Elle's mending leg. He watched her stand and walk at the speed of a crawling turtle around the room—unaided.

You experience no pain?

Elle shook her head. "No. It aches if I stand on it too long or if I jar it, but it's getting better."

Duval nodded. *Good.*

"Well?" Elle asked.

Duval twisted his lips. *There is no way to tell how well the bone has mended, but I believe it is safe for you to try walking without your crutches provided you do not exhaust yourself. You will need to work at regaining your muscles and sense of balance.*

"What about going home?" Elle asked.

You are not strong enough to walk back.

"No, but could I ride a horse, or go in a carriage?" Elle asked.

Duval glanced at Emele, who was twisting a handkerchief. Yes, he finally wrote. *However, I recommend you wait until the end of the week to depart and work on regaining your strength until then.*

"Would Saturday be an acceptable date?" Elle asked.

Duval wrote with the swiftness of a snail. *I suppose.*

"Excellent!" Elle said, smiling widely until she noticed Duval and Emele exchanging morose looks. "Come now, you two. It's not like I'm dying."

*No, Emele wrote, but you **are** leaving us.*

"I will come back to visit, I promise."

It won't be the same, Emele wrote, her lower lip trembling.

Elle's lips twisted into a wry grin. "You mean after I leave the chances that I will break Severin's curse are significantly lower?"

Duval's mouth flapped like a flag, and Emele dropped her slate.

"Oh yes," Elle said. "I know all about your secret plans."

Emele covered her face with her hands.

Duval recovered long enough to write, *How?*

"Severin," Elle said.

Duval hung his head, and Emele bent to retrieve her slate.

I did not mean to use you, Elle. The maid earnestly wrote.

Elle's smirk softened. "I know, Emele. I do not doubt that you genuinely like me, but an eligible maiden was too good of a chance to pass up, I suppose?"

Emele considered Elle's words before writing out a reply. *No, it was not merely that you are female. Or perhaps it was at first, but I really began to hope when I learned what a compassionate, spirited person you are.*

Duval added, *Not just any girl is suited for Our Lord.*

"No, I suppose not," Elle said before she shook her head. "But I could have saved you the hope."

You do not intend to fall in love? Emele timidly asked.

"No, but thanks to my profession as an indentured servant to the crown I have certain prejudices against the royal family."

Emele rolled her eyes. *Oh. Them. I assure you that His Highness is very different from his family.*

"I'm not so sure about that," Elle muttered

Emele started to write again, but Duval pushed her slate down presented his. *We thank you for your honesty. In spite of what appears to be ulterior motives, we have enjoyed your stay at Chanceux Chateau.*

Emele read Duval's slate and nodded.

Elle smiled. "Thank you, both of you. I really will miss you."

Emele blinked rapidly to hold back tears before reaching out to embrace Elle.

"You'll crush your dress," Elle reminded the ladies maid.

Emele fiercely hugged Elle closer.

Elle was thankful Duval made a swift exit and Emele retreated to tend to the fire after the moment was over, giving her time to collect herself.

Chapter 10

Stranded

“It is too early for dinner. I trust you have a reason for closeting us here?” Elle said the following day when Severin led her into the empty dining room.

“I need to finish going through these missives,” Severin said. “I will never be able to read so long as I am apart from you. My servants have set themselves in a panic since your departure has been secured. If we are together they will undoubtedly leave us alone.”

“That fails to explain why we’re in the dining room,” Elle said, following Severin to the table—using her crutches.

Severin took up his normal seat at the head of the table. His back was to the fire and he set a stack of papers on the table where a bowl of a cut up, golden fruit was stationed. “The dining room is the best room for you to get physical exercise in.”

“I *hope*, Severin, that you are referring to the rehabilitation of my leg,” Elle said.

“Of course I am. What else would I be referring to?”

Elle used a crutch to point at the dining table. “The fact that I gorge myself on Bernadine’s dangerously tasty cooking?”

The corners of Severin’s lips curled for a moment. “In any case, you should walk around the room—without your crutches. It will be good practice.”

“I walk without Emele hovering and you get to read your letters in peace. It is a good exchange,” Elle said, leaning her crutches against the table.

“Go walk,” Severin ordered, immersing himself in his work.

Elle tottered off, correcting her posture and growing taller as she went. Making a lap around the table took more effort than Elle expected. When she paused near Severin to rest the cursed prince picked up the bowl of peeled, golden fruit and held it out to her.

Elle took a piece and popped it in her mouth. It exploded with sweet, citrus flavor. It was sweeter than an orange, and tasted much how

Elle imagined the summer sun would taste. “What is this?” Elle asked.

“Pineapple,” Severin said, reaching for a letter with his right hand while setting the fruit down with the other.

“I have never heard of it.”

“I should think not. It’s a newly imported fruit from the far south kingdoms. We finally secured trade agreements with them this year.”

“Far south, so not our southern neighbors?”

“No, even farther south than them. Their climate is warm year round.”

“Imagine that,” Elle said, starting another lap.

“Mmmhmm,” Severin said, engrossed in his letters.

Elle walked further and occasionally paused to flex the muscles in her ankles and legs. When she finished the lap by coming to a stop next to Severin, the prince again wordlessly held out the bowl of pineapple up for her.

Elle took a slice. “Delicious,” she decided.

Severin didn’t respond.

When Elle started her third lap a panting Jock squeezed in through the ajar door. He barked when he saw Elle and scurried to her side, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.

“Come along, Jock. You could use the exercise as well,” Elle said, patting the soft fabric of her dress before she set off.

Jock waddled after her, breathing heavily enough to make Severin glance up to see if he had flopped over.

Elle and the beautiful but overweight canine strolled, dallying at the far end of the room to view the room’s sparse décor and furnishings. When they finished the loop and ended at Severin’s side, Elle took her customary piece of fruit from Severin.

Jock danced in place as he watched Elle eat and licked his chops.

Elle reached into a hidden pocket of her dress, digging out a small piece of jerky to give the little dog.

Jock just about oinked in thankfulness, and after a minute he and Elle continued on their walk.

When the pair finished their fourth lap and Elle gave Jock his customary piece of jerky after taking a piece of pineapple from the bowl Severin offered, Elle paused. She looked from Jock to Severin to the bowl of fruit. “Am I being rewarded for walking?” she asked.

“Yes,” Severin said.

“Like a pet?”

“Yes.”

Severin looked up when Elle asked nothing further and was amused to see Elle’s puzzled expression. “Are you upset?” he asked.

“I’m trying to decide that,” Elle said. “Shamefully I don’t believe I am.”

Severin chuffed—the noise Elle learned to identify as his laugh. “I see,” he said when he recovered.

“If you do see I should get another piece of pineapple for my sweet, forgiving nature.”

Severin held up the bowl again. “How could I argue with such logic?”

“Thank you, I thought so too. But this negates the good that walking does me.”

“Hardly. Your weight is not yet a problem. It is the weakness of your muscles.”

“You certainly know how to reassure a lady.”

“You’re welcome.”



A few days later Severin and Elle once again made the pilgrimage through the blustery courtyard to the horse stables.

“You would think it is the middle of the winter, based on the temperature,” Elle said, grateful that Emele had insisted she wear a fur lined cape.

After the wind almost ripped the door from his grip, Severin barred the stable door behind them. “Ours is a cooler climate,” he grunted.

“Are you going to brush Fidele?” Elle asked.

“Yes, but that is not why we are here.”

“Oh?”

Severin pointed down the stable aisle. The draft horses had already retreated to the back of their stalls, and the carriage horses were snarling, but in the stall next to Fidele’s was a fuzzy, pony.

He was the size of a small horse, but thicker with a soft, round body. He was chestnut colored with a white star on his forehead. When Severin

approached he did not shy away, but instead watched the cursed prince with bright eyes.

“You bought a pony,” Elle said, joining Severin at the pony’s stall. The pony was clearly ready for winter with a coat as thick and furry as a bear’s.

“Yes, a gelding—although his name is questionable.”

“What is it?”

“Rosemerry.”

Elle grinned at the sour looking Severin. “He sounds sweet. I am impressed he is calm with you.”

“He should be. I have given him so many apples Oliver fears he would grow ill if he is given many more,” Severin dryly said. “And he is not mine. He is yours.”

Elle, in the middle of scratching Rosemerry’s forehead for him, froze. “Pardon?”

“I bought him for your use.”

“Severin, I’m staying for a mere two more days. You shouldn’t have bothered.”

“You misunderstand. He is leaving with you,” Severin said. The wooden stall wall protested when he leaned his weight against it. “He will stay with you at Noyers. The hostlers expect your arrival, and his feeding and lodging has already been arranged.”

Elle shook her head. “I can’t.”

“I thought you said you liked horses?” Severin asked.

“I do,” Elle said. “It’s just...”

For the first time in their acquaintance, Elle was at a loss for words. When the pony leaned into her touch her face tightened and she narrowed her eyes. It took Severin a few moments to realize she was forcibly keeping herself from crying.

“It’s too much,” Elle finally said, turning to face Severin. “You’ve housed me and fed me for *weeks*, Severin, **and** you had an entirely new wardrobe made for me. You’ve already given me too much, I can never repay you.”

Severin tilted his head, his cat ears quizzically flicking. “You aren’t meant to. That’s what a gift means.”

“People don’t give me gifts,” Elle said. “I can take care of myself and my family without aid or assistance.”

“I don’t mean to imply you are incapable by giving you a gift. It is precisely the opposite,” Severin said. “Hasn’t anyone given one to you before?”

Elle looked at Rosemerry. “Not like this.”

“You alone carry your family’s financial burden?”

“Yes.”

Severin nodded. “I thought as much. You have a savior complex.”

“I do not!” Elle sputtered.

Severin cracked a feline smile at her. “You do. And you are nearly as proud as I am. I bought the pony only with the motivation of bringing you joy. You seem happier around animals. You told me yourself that you find animals soothing. I would send Jock home with you if I could, but Heloise loves the mongrel too much. You said you didn’t have a horse,” Severin trailed off with a shrug.

“But the dresses—.”

Severin sighed, which sounded more like an impatient growl. “Although I am pleased you are not greedy for more, I find your estimation of my wealth deplorable. The price of the dresses and Rosemerry are miniscule in comparison to my income. I—and my household—will feel no pain on behalf of these purchases. They will not even be noticed.”

Elle was silent for a moment before she chuckled. “Oh, they will be noticed! You can bet that Bernadine and Emele are consorting over the pony right now.”

“That is probably so.”

Elle stroked Rosemerry for a few good minutes before Severin finally spoke again. “Elle, take him.”

Elle scrunched her eyes shut. “Alright,” she agreed before opening her green eyes and smiling at Severin. “Thank you for the pony, Severin. I will treasure him.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less of you,” Severin said, turning around to walk back up the aisle.

“Where are you going?” Elle asked.

“To get the side saddle.”

“I beg your *pardon*?”

“He wouldn’t be any good to you without tack, would he?”

“The weather is too poor to ride outside,” Elle said.

“Naturally. You can perch on him in here and test how riding feels with your leg,” Severin said, returning with a ladies side saddle. “I bought you a regular saddle too in which you can sit astride in, but be careful in choosing when to use it. You will upset the delicate sensibilities of noble women, should they see you riding so,” Severin sneered, opening the door to Rosemerry’s box stall.

Elle watched the easy way Severin strapped the oddly shaped saddle on Rosemerry’s back. “You really like horses, don’t you?”

Severin glanced up as he tightened the saddle’s girth. “Yes. I spent much of my boyhood serving under the generals of Loire’s cavalry. I grew up on them.”

“You don’t get to be around them much anymore?”

“Not looking and smelling like this,” Severin shrugged.

“I’m sorry,” Elle said.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. Sit lightly,” was the only warning Severin gave before he picked Elle up and perched her on the saddle.

Elle grasped Rosemerry’s neck as she heaved her legs into position. “Thank you for the warning.”

“You’re welcome,” Severin said, adjusting the placement of Elle’s leg on the saddle. “Now, I’m going to get his halter and lead him in the aisle. When I do you can grip his mane...”



The morning of Elle’s departure, Elle hurried down the stairs in her gray dress—stepping carefully and gripping the stair railing. Emele skirted at her side, but Elle ignored the slate the ladies maid pushed at her.

“It’s wrong, I must have miss-seen the view from my window. It can’t be,” Elle said when she reached the main floor. Servants seemed to crawl out of the woodwork as Elle took firm, confident strides.

Bernadine, flanked by two kitchen maids, emerged from the hallway leading to the kitchen, wiping her hands on a flour spattered apron. Burke and several menservants hesitated on the stairway at the far side of the room.

Normally Elle would have realized what their appearance meant, but she was fixated on the front door. She reached it and wrenched it open, opening the door to a sea of swirling white. Overnight it had snowed at least

a foot, and more was coming down as the wind howled. It was a blizzard. An enraged, vengeful blizzard.

Although the wind pulled on Elle's hair and her dress, Elle stared outside until her eyelashes froze. She finally closed the door and leaned against it, her forehead resting on the wooden surface.

"Elle."

Elle turned to face Severin, who stood with Burke on the stairs. "I cannot leave. We would never get out through all this snow, and more is piling up by the minute," she said.

Severin nodded as he drew closer. "It would not be wise," he agreed. "You are still worried the crown will abuse you for your absence?"

Elle briefly tightened her lips. "It makes me feel helpless," she admitted.

"You will never trust me to secure your livelihood, will you? I am a prince, Elle. You are safe here. Think of it as an extended holiday."

Elle laughed. "Where have I heard that before?"

Severin stared at her. "...Are you well?" he finally asked.

Elle sighed, and the exhale seemed to deflate her.

Severin turned to stand at her side. He offered her an arm. "Breakfast?"

"Breakfast," Elle agreed, cracking a smile.

They left the main floor, heading for Severin's study.

As they left Bernadine and Heloise clasped hands—their eyes hooked on Elle's and Severin's interlaced arms.

Emele brushed out the message she had written to Elle before writing anew. *A miracle?*

Bernadine nodded and Heloise crossed herself as Burke and his compatriots slapped each other on the back. Elle wasn't happy about her extended stay, but the Chanceux Chateau household was thrilled.



Severin watched Elle in the dim firelight. She was covered in a blanket and slumped in an armchair, sleeping. Her mouth was not the tight line it had been all day, but a relaxed curve. Her mass of unruly hair fell down her shoulders, and she was dangerously close to sucking up a lock of it whenever she breathed in. The tension had finally left her around lunch, but she hung about Severin all day, even into the late evening.

Severin glanced at the window at the back of his study. It was ink black outside, and snow still gusted in the howling winds. Severin returned his gaze to Elle, who shivered, before he rose to stir up the red coals in the fireplace and add a log to it.

Elle yawned when Severin returned to his chair. “Did I wake you?” he asked.

“No. I was only dosing,” Elle said, pulling the blanket farther up and keeping her eyes closed. “Severin, why are you kind to me?”

“You thought I would be a brute just because I’m royal?” Severin asked, a hint of a tease in his voice.

“No one is kind to me, not without an ulterior motive,” Elle said, her words slurred with drowsiness.

Severin’s cat ears twitched. “What about your family?”

“Of course *they’re* kind to me,” Elle said, shifting in her chair. “But it’s not the same. They expect so much from me.”

“Like what?”

“They see no limit to my strength. They think I can do anything.”

“Wouldn’t such confidence be considered a blessing?”

“Maybe, but I cannot show a shred of weakness around them. When I first was indentured I was proud that I alone could help my family. It’s not that they are ungrateful or unloving, but I’m so tired...”

“And they expect you to keep going,” Severin said.

Elle briefly looked at Severin. “Yes,” she said before closing her eyes again.

Severin leaned back in his chair before he reached for his wine glass and considered his houseguest. Elle always seemed like a sharp minded thing. A fox came to mind when describing her, but the artless, open look her face took on in the muck of her lethargy spoke otherwise.

“I am kind to you because of your courage and compassion. Most people scream when they see my servants, much less me. I don’t recall you screaming over anything besides your broken leg,” Severin said. He sipped his wine—it was warm and flat.

“You’re gentle,” Elle murmured, drawing closer to sleep.

Severin snorted. “In what way? I have the personality of a savage, even Lucien says so. My temperament is sour and my humor is typically ill appreciated.”

The edges of Elle's lips—which Severin was starting to think might not be too big for her face after all—curled in the hint of a smile. "Your humor is *funny*," she insisted. "Most people just aren't smart enough to understand it."

"Thank you," Severin said after a few moments.

Elle didn't reply, having finally given into the siren song of sleep.

Severin watched her for a few moments before he stood and walked to her chair. He delicately captured the lock of hair she inhaled with her breathing and tucked it behind her ear. He froze in the middle of the motion, staring at his hand as if it had betrayed him.

"No," he firmly said. "It's too late. It can't be broken. Even if I wanted her to, she wouldn't. She knows better than to fall for an illegitimate prince," Severin chastised himself before tugging Elle's sliding blanket up and settling it on her shoulders. He returned to his work with renewed vigor, doing everything in his power to ignore the relaxed female sleeping nearby.



"Being that I am of a high intellect, I find cursing distasteful and ill mannered. If that were not the case, however, I would compose a creative, innovative ballad of cursing and recite it at this moment," Elle announced, swaddled in enough fur lined clothing pieces to make it difficult to move.

Elle was once again on her wretched crutches, not because she had declined in health, but because none of the servants would allow her to take chances as she stood outside with them in the sunshine and two feet of snow.

Emele rolled her eyes as she used a broom to sweep snow off a series of four stairs. She paused long enough to write, *It is beautiful. Be grateful you are outside. The sun will do you good.*

"It is cold and I am angered that no method of transportation will be able to travel through this snow for some days. And do not pretend this is for my health, I know we are outside only because Marc is shoveling snow as well," Elle said, briefly lifting a crutch to point out the stout gardener, who was clearing snow from a path that followed the perimeter of the chateau.

Emele burned with embarrassment and pushed Elle's crutch down before she looked around to see if any of the other servants witnessed her

mortification. No one had, mostly because the male servants weren't very interested in gossip if it did not involve breaking their curse.

Elle and Emele were the only ladies present. All of the male servants—from Burke to the stable boys to the footmen—had assembled into a massive snow shoveling army to help Marc and his fellow groundskeepers to shovel stairs, walkways, balconies, and courtyards.

Must you trumpet it to all parts of the chateau? Emele wrote before she went back to sweeping the light dusting of snow the shovels left behind.

Elle waddled a few steps in her swaddling. "What do you expect? You have hobbled me with an over abundance of clothes and crutches."

Emele shook her head before she froze. A smirk crawled across her lips as she wrote on her slate. *You must be dreadfully bored. Let us talk then, so you are properly entertained.*

Elle eyed her ladies maid. "Very well, what shall we discuss?"

Romance.

Elle smiled. "I thought that's what we *were* talking about."

Emele hastily wrote, *Not **my** romance! I meant yours.*

Elle's wicked smile fell flat. "You are a wolf in a sheep's fleece. Emele, I have told you before, nothing will happen between your master and I. Push off and leave that topic alone."

And why would you immediately assume I was thinking of a romance with Prince Severin?

"Because Oliver is about ten years too young for me," Elle said, moving closer to the chateau wall to shelter herself from the wind.

You have been spending much of your time with him recently.

"With Oliver? No I haven't," Elle said.

Emele impatiently stamped a foot. *No, with His Highness!*

Elle shrugged—a motion that could barely be seen due to the amount of cloth piled on her. "I enjoy his company—not in the romantic sense," Elle hastily added. "He knows when to be quiet, and when to say something. He has a delightful sense of humor, and as an added incentive when I am with him you are not hounding me to find him."

It sounds like friendship.

"Of a sort, yes. In the beginning I think he mostly tolerated me, but I would like to think that Severin no longer finds me a nuisance and enjoys our time as well," Elle said.

What is love but friendship set on fire?

“Oh get off it. You are twisting my words. Besides, everyone knows love requires a base, physical attraction,” Elle said. “And claws and fangs are hardly the things of romance.”

No.

Elle stared at the slate and raised her eyes to Emele.

The ladies maid had abandoned her broom. The parts of her face that weren't covered by her mask were flushed with color, and it took Elle a moment to realize it wasn't with embarrassment or coldness, but with anger.

“What do you mean?” Elle carefully asked.

Beauty fades, Emele wrote. It weakens or it disappears, or something happens and it is ruined. Emele briefly reached up, grasping the edge of her permanent, black mask. She mouthed something before shaking her head.

Elle waited as Emele collected herself. She placed a hand on her friend's shoulder, making the maid smile.

I came from a good, middle class family, Emele wrote. My father is a well-to-do horse breeder, and my mother served as a ladies maid in her younger days. My family hoped I would marry well, especially after I secured a post in Severin's house where I would be exposed to his sister—the Princess—and assumedly whatever lady he chose to marry. I, Emele hesitated before she wrote. I was beautiful.

“You still are,” Elle said.

Emele shook her head. *Only you would think that. Before the curse I was aware of my social standing. I scorned Marc and the servants below me. I thought that I was better than them, and I mocked Marc behind his back for his looks and mannerisms.*

Emele looked up at the sky and deeply inhaled the cold air before she wrote again. *And then we were cursed. I lost my beauty, the beaux who had been pursuing me all removed their suits, and my family disowned me. They first came to the palace to see if it was true. When they saw me...*

“But it wasn't your fault,” Elle objected. “The curse fell on you because you were a member of Severin's household, and he didn't do anything to deserve it.”

My parents feared what having a cursed daughter would do to their social standing. When they came we fought. My father moved to strike me and Marc—whom I had mocked and looked down upon—heard my parents' yells and stepped in on my behalf.

Elle adjusted her crutches. "That was honorable of him."

Emele soundlessly laughed as she tried to brush a frozen tear from her eyelashes. *Honorable, kind, compassionate, and chivalrous of him. I was a selfish girl who had done nothing but mock him, and he saved me.* The ladies maid hesitated for a moment. *I know Marc would not be considered handsome by most, but it is his heart I fell in love with. Beauty fades, but the heart remains the same. And how many men would protect a girl who openly scorned them?*

Elle found that she couldn't speak. The sadness and sweetness of Emele's story had rendered her speechless.

Physical desire is a lie, Emele continued. *It is not a bad thing, but it blinds a person and makes them unable to see truth. Falling in love is a matter of the heart, not of the exterior.*

Elle nodded, and Emele waited a long time before writing, *What kind of heart do you think His Highness has?*

Elle removed her gaze from Emele and stared out at the snow covered gardens. "I'm not sure."

Emele smiled and cast a longing glance at Marc.

"Why don't you greet him?" Elle suggested.

Emele clutched her broom and slate close before she nodded and set off down the cleared walkway, heading for the burly gardener.

Elle watched her go, observing the awkward pair interact with new eyes. After a few moments she shifted to look at the chateau. "What kind of heart *does* Severin have?" Elle wondered. "Before my fall I wouldn't have hesitated to say cold and uncaring but..." Elle trailed off as she thought of her new pony, of Severin housing and feeding her even though she was nothing more than a prowler. She remembered the way he allowed Heloise to think her affection for Jock was secret, his obvious sorrow that his servants were doomed to be cursed with him, and that throughout her entire stay he had never expected anything from her and had never touched her with anything but gentleness.

"I don't know," Elle repeated.



Everyone at Chanceux Chateau took it for granted that Elle and Severin spent time together, even Elle and Severin.

It was no longer just dinner, but all hours of the day. If Elle wanted to escape Emele and the other giggling maids, or if Severin wanted to work without being forced to read sermons inscribed by his personal valet, the two could be found together.

Amazingly, Elle was able to drag Severin from his study. Servants would find them in the library—Severin would be doing his work at a table while Elle triumphantly walked up and down aisle ways, crutch-less and looking for books—in different salons—Burke once found them playing cards in the recreation salon—the stables were a regular spot—Fidele and Rosemerry had to be brushed after all—and, of course, in the evenings the pair was almost guaranteed to be found in Severin’s study.

They were not together for the day in its entirety. Rather, they spent a few hours together in the morning or early afternoon before eating together and sequestering themselves in the study when it grew late.

A week after Elle’s originally scheduled—and canceled—departure, Severin and Elle spent the morning in the Gold salon, which was used as a music room.

“I always thought the library was the most expensive feature of the chateau. I’m no longer sure,” Elle said, thoughtfully studying a huge harp that was almost as tall as her. Fanned around it—like an arrangement of gold haired children—was an assortment of smaller lap harps.

“What makes you think that?” Severin asked, briefly looking up from the map he was poring over.

“Books are expensive to be sure, but each instrument here cost a fortune,” Elle said, her gaze moving from the harp family to the violins displayed on the wall and the harpsichord—an instrument that had *just* been perfected by the neighboring country of Torrens not five years ago.

“Do you play?” Severin asked, setting his map aside entirely.

Elle barked a chord of laughter. “No.”

“Then how do you know they are costly?”

“By the ornate beauty of each instrument. The harp has real gold molding, and that is an original *Mishael* painting on the underside of the harpsichord top, or a very good replica. Additionally none of the instruments have been recently played. They haven’t been moved—you can tell by the imprints in the rug—and none of them have been altered or repaired.”

Severin eyed Elle. “Considering you do not play you know much about instruments.”

“I don’t, I just know building materials.”

“And you are observant. I’m not sure I would have picked up on the rug imprints,” Severin said, narrowing his eyes.

Elle kept her face bland. “Or I’m an indentured servant of the crown—a job which keeps one on ones toes.”

To Elle’s relief the explanation seemed to satisfy Severin. “Probably,” he agreed before rising with a growl deep in his throat. He walked to the windows and folded his paws behind his back as he looked out at the snow blanketed land. “I am surprised the snow has not melted yet. Usually our first snow lasts only a few days, leaving a muddy mess to wade through until it freezes again.”

Elle joined Severin at the window. “Do you have a sleigh?”

“Yes, but it is for the draft horses,” Severin said, studying the bright snowfall. “I’m not certain a single draft horse could take you as far as the capital, and the only sleigh in the chateau that is built for a team is for farm use.”

“I see,” Elle said.

“But...with all the drifting it may be possible to forge through on horseback,” Severin said, tilting his head in a very cat-like gesture.

“You think Rosemerry could carry me?” Elle asked.

“Perhaps, if he was following another horse to break the path. But only if the snow is not heavy, wet, and deep,” Severin said. He hesitated. “Maybe we could ride out to the roads tomorrow and inspect their condition. Regardless of the snow depth, if Rosemerry only needs to carry you for less than an hour he will manage, and all the chateau inroads have been cleared.

“Excellent,” Elle said. “A short ride will allow me to test my leg as well. And if the wind isn’t howling like a wolf and the sun is out I expect the weather would be almost pleasant.” Elle finished her sentence with a satisfied nod

Severin bowed his head before turning his back to the window. “That is so,” he agreed. “I will alert the head groom and make the arrangements. You will tell Emele?”

“Certainly,” Elle said. “Severin, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For going through this trouble on my behalf.”

Severin shrugged. “I would not do it if I did not want to,” he said.

Elle thoughtfully watched the cursed prince, wondering what he meant by that. Severin didn’t look up again and immersed himself in his work for the remainder of the morning.

Chapter 11

To Protect

There was barely a breeze and the sun pierced the clouds when Severin and Elle met in the courtyard for their ride the following day.

The horses were already saddled, Oliver held Fidele while Severin waited in front of Rosemerry with folded arms and narrowed eyes.

“Emele, it’s nothing but a short ride. I’m going to be fine, would you stop fussing?” Elle asked as the maid tried to tie a second scarf around Elle’s neck. “What’s wrong?” Elle asked Severin when she reached the prince and pony.

Severin nodded at the chateau entrance. “We have an audience.”

Elle turned to see servants oozing out of the front hall like a flock of birds. Those who couldn’t bear the cold were pressed against windows, their black masks stark against the illuminated glass.

Elle turned back to Rosemerry. “It’s better to ignore them, else we’ll give them more fodder.”

“Agreed. Sit lightly,” was again Severin’s only warning before he picked her up and placed her on the side saddle. He steadied her with his huge, clawed hands around her waist as Elle tried to maneuver her various skirts and cape so she sat properly.

“Does Emele fear I plan to lead you into a blizzard?” Severin inquired when Elle finally pushed her legs into place.

“I think she fears the cold in general. She has placed so many coverlets on my bed I accused her of trying to suffocate me in my sleep,” Elle said, fumbling to grasp the reins with her thickly gloved fingers.

Severin chuffed before he nodded to Oliver and smoothly mounted Fidele. The large gelding tossed his head before leading the way out of the courtyard and down the shoveled driveway.

Behind them the servants—unable to call out—clapped their hands or waved white, lace handkerchiefs in the crisp air.

Neither Severin nor Elle acknowledged the send off as they rode on.

It took nearly five minutes to reach the edge of Chanceux Chateau grounds. The front gates were open, fastened to the walls of a brick bridge

that extended over a small river, but the road running outside the chateau was untouched by travelers and snow shovelers alike.

"We will ride east, it's the route we will take when you finally are able to return to the palace," Severin said, gesturing up the road.

"Very well," Elle said.

They settled into a brisk walk, Severin going first on Fidele to break the path for the smaller Rosemerry.

The snow was not terribly deep in most places on the road. It had drifted horribly on the far side of the road, gathering in piles nearly as tall as Rosemerry in some spots, but as a result the opposite edge was scant inches deep.

"It certainly is beautiful," Elle said. Snow covered the trees and bushes in a white glaze, and the sunshine made it sparkle.

Severin glanced at the iced branches overhead. "It can be," he said.

"You're a gardener, how can you not enjoy the beauty of nature?"

"I also happen to be a general, and snow is miserable weather to camp or move an army in."

Elle thoughtfully studied the snowy forest. "How far do the chateau lands extend?" Elle asked.

"Quite far. Chanceux Chateau is the only household in these woods. The village is the closest settlement, but the woods extend for miles until reaching Lord de Bertainmont's land."

"His land borders the capital's district, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"So it is quite rural in these parts."

"Yes."

The pair was quiet for a time until Severin asked, "You find it forlorn?"

"What do you mean?"

"The small population and lack of industry."

"Goodness, no. I have spent my life penned up in the city, I heartily approve of the extra elbow room. I am dreadfully jealous of my sisters and their rustic lifestyle in the country," Elle said.

"It is rare for a person to feel that way," Severin said.

"How do you find the country life to be?" Elle asked.

Severin shifted in the saddle. "I do not know. I enjoy the chateau and the privacy it brings, but my work is greatly hindered by the isolation.

If I could ride to the palace to straighten out army affairs rather than meet with my brother in the lodge I believe I would enjoy it more.”

“Why do you meet at the lodge then?” Elle asked.

Severin didn’t respond.

Elle shrugged and returned her attention to the scenery. “What is that?” Elle asked, pointing to a depilated looking bridge that was covered in snow.

“I believe that is the entrance to one of the chateau’s many hunting trails. As I do not share the passion for hunting that Lucien has, it has not been used in some time. It leads into a back path to the gardens, though.”

“How useful,” Elle said as they forged on. “How long do you think we should press on?”

“I’m not certain,” Severin said. “Unfortunately I do not think you will be able to trudge home in this, unless more of it melts. Rosemerry is not capable off—,” Severin silenced himself and halted Fidele, making the big gelding restlessly paw at the snow covered ground.

“What is it?” Elle asked.

Severin held up a hand and stared into the forest, his ears were rigid as he listened. He narrowed his eyes and placed a hand on his rapier—which Elle hadn’t thought much of him bringing until that moment.

Elle uneasily shifted in the saddle, making her boot that she stored her small dagger in easier to reach. Rosemerry snorted, and Elle finally heard it. Cackling.

The dark laughter echoed up and down the road as the sun disappeared behind a cloud and bare tree branches rattled overhead. Elle closed her eyes when the wind kicked up with a howl, pulling on her clothes and stinging her cheeks with its icy breath.

When it finally subsided Elle opened her eyes.

An old woman, a hag wrapped in cloth that looked like cobwebs, stood in their way not twenty feet up the road. Her face was lined with wrinkles—not the ones that expressed joy or laughter, but lines etched by the permanent grimace she wore. What few teeth she had were black, but most unsettling were her white eyes. They were the sickly color of curdled milk.

Rosemerry snorted and danced backwards, making Elle cling to him.

Severin unsheathed his rapier and the hag chuckled.

“Unnecessary, boy. It’s not you I’m interested in,” she said, looking past Severin so her milky eyes rested on Elle. “Girl, pretty girl, won’t you come stay with granny?” she cooed in a thin, reedy voice before breaking into shrieking laughter.

“I will pass, thank you. If you’ll excuse us,” Elle said.

The hag leaned on a massive walking stick, squinting at Elle. “You have fire, yes. Your heart will surely last me a decade, maybe longer.”

Elle started to turn Rosemerry around. She glanced at Severin, he nodded.

When Elle clucked to Rosemerry, urging him away from the hag, wind blasted her and a skeletal tree cracked and fell in the path, making both Rosemerry and Fidele shy.

“Ah-ah-ah. I did not say you could leave, dearie. It’s been too long since I’ve supped on a maiden’s heart,” the woman said, rubbing her gnarled hands together as she lurched closer.

Severin was off Fidele in one smooth movement, standing between Elle and the crone with his rapier thrust at the old woman.

“Not a step forward,” he growled.

The crone snarled. “I have no need for men. Leave, boy.”

“No,” Severin said.

The hag stopped shuffling and regarded Severin. The white color of her eyes seemed to swirl as she studied him. “A fighter are you? Won’t do you any good. Stand aside or I’ll curse you.”

“It’s a little late for that,” Severin said, crouching in what Elle recognized as a sword stance.

The hag chuckled, making the hair on Elle’s arms prickle. “Heroics will only see you dead,” she said, her voice growing darker until she sounded like the rumbling growls of starved wolves. “Your curse is nothing but child’s play; I can forge something a thousand times worse. A century of being picked at by crows—they’ll start with your eyeballs of course—or how about being buried alive? Maybe I’ll imprison your spirit and you can serve me for eternity, but that wouldn’t be as satisfying as baking you whole. Oh, I do so love to be gruesome.”

“Severin,” Elle said.

“Be still,” Severin ordered.

“But in the end, maybe I’ll gut you and tan your hide. You would make a fine decoration,” the hag said, bobbing her skinny neck.

When Severin took another step towards the crone she raised her staff. Again the wind buffeted Severin and Elle, pelting them with shards of ice. The horses screamed. The hag laughed.

The crone hugged herself while Severin and Elle recovered. Her laugh broke into a shriek when Severin nailed her shoulder with a hand axe Elle hadn't seen him unearth.

The hag screamed like an animal and whirled her walking stick in the air. "You shall pay for that, beast!" she spat, her staff starting to glow the same curdled color as her eyes.

Severin struck like a snake, stabbing his sword in the woman's chest before ripping it upwards.

The woman howled and her body erupted into ash colored snow, sickly swirling for a moment before the wind carried it away. Her howls echoed in the woods long after the fight was over.

Rosemerry shook, and Fidele tossed his head after Severin sheathed his sword and mounted up.

"What was that?" Elle asked, gripping her saddle for support.

"A mountain hag, I think," Severin said. "They are twisted, evil magical entities. They mostly live in Verglas, our northern neighbor, but sometimes they wander south to us in the winter months if they are desperate enough. They prey on young women, killing them and devouring their hearts. Typically one does not see them in Loire but on the darkest days of the year. I find it worrisome that one is already this far south when it is but the first snow of the season."

Elle shivered and felt for the shape of her dagger pressed into the side of her boot.

"We should return to the chateau. I wouldn't think more than one mountain hag would wander into this wood, but I don't wish to chance it. This way," Severin said, taking Fidele off the path.

The mouse colored horse plunged into a drift to skirt around the fallen tree before Severin steered him back onto the road.

Rosemerry followed, shaking once to making his fur poof up.

When they were further down the road Elle twisted in the saddle to glance behind them. She could barely see the fallen tree—a sad, black figure spread across the road. "Severin, thank you."

"For?"

"For fighting the hag for me."

Severin pulled Fidele into a halt and actually turned around to stare at Elle. "As long as you are in my care you are my responsibility. I will make sure no farther harm comes to you."

"Harm is one thing, but she threatened to curse you more than you already are."

"I was prepared for such an outcome."

"And you still did it?"

"Of course."

Severin and Elle stared at each other for a few moments before Severin said, "I don't understand what you are surprised about."

Elle stared down at Rosemerry's fat, glossy neck. "No one has ever been willing to sacrifice themselves for me."

"Elle."

The tone of Severin's voice dragged Elle eyes up so they met his.

"I will always protect you," he said before straightening in his saddle and cuing Fidele on.

Elle stared at Severin's back, her mind in an uproar. She wanted to believe Severin, but how could she when she was indentured because of him?



Late that night Elle crept down the hallway that led to the kitchens. The castle was quiet, not just because the servants couldn't talk, but because everyone was asleep. It was the dog watch of the night, and Elle had spent hours tossing and twisting in her bed. She was so restless Jock had abandoned her after the first hour.

"If I can't rest I may as well get a snack," Elle said, following the corridor.

When she entered the kitchens, Elle was shocked to find Bernadine, alert and working. The doughy woman was puttering around her domain, arranging gleaming pots and inspecting fresh produce, and she was not alone. Heloise sat on a stool at the table Bernadine bustled around, nursing a cup of steaming tea.

"Bernadine, Heloise?" Elle said, alerting the women to her presence.

Bernadine smiled and beckoned Elle in. When Elle stalled, somewhat embarrassed to be seen by the older women in her dressing

gown, the cook waddled forward and grasped her hand, pulling her into the warmth of the kitchen.

The air smelled like freshly baked bread, and two fireplaces blazed with cheerful flames. Jock slept on his back, his belly exposed to the world, cuddled next to a kitchen cat that was kept to keep the chateau clear of mice.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Elle said, sliding onto a stool next to Heloise.

Bernadine smiled at Elle and wrote, *You came to the right place*, before she grabbed a fresh loaf of bread with a towel and started sawing at it with a formidable looking knife.

Heloise retrieved another cup and saucer. She poured out a serving of tea and presented Elle with the cup.

“Thank you,” Elle said, sipping the tea. It was chamomile, lightly sweetened with honey. It warmed Elle from the inside out, and took the stiffness out of her shoulders.

Bernadine slathered butter on a steaming slice of honey oat bread before she placed it on a plate and slid it in front of Elle.

Elle bit into the rich bread, sighing with satisfaction.

Now, what has you upset? Bernadine asked.

“I’m not upset, it is merely that I cannot sleep,” Elle firmly said before sipping her tea.

That’s the worst lie you’ve ever told. Heloise wrote.

You clearly have something on your mind. Tell us, you’ll feel better, Bernadine urged.

You’ve raised Bernadine’s curiosity now. There will be no silencing her until you tell, Heloise wrote when Elle delayed replying by eating more warm bread.

“I was thinking of the mountain hag,” Elle said.

Heloise crossed herself, and Bernadine puffed up like Jock when he barked at Severin. Neither Bernadine nor Emele had taken the news of the mountain hag particularly well when Severin and Elle returned from their ride. Elle half expected the ladies maid to insist on sleeping in her room that evening.

Bernadine tugged on her mask before writing, *It is a good thing His Highness was able to protect you.*

Heloise nodded once and raised her tea cup in a silent toast.

The memory is keeping you awake? Bernadine added to her slate.

“In a way,” Elle said. “I don’t understand why Severin protected me.”

It is the duty of a man to protect his companions, Heloise wrote.

“To a certain extent, that is true. But the hag was threatening him, and I don’t believe it was a mere play. She would have harmed him.”

His Highness is too good of a soldier to be taken down by a mountain hag, Bernadine wrote, her small lips twisted in disgust.

“But why did he even take the chance?” Elle asked, cradling her tea cup.

His Lordliness will make extravagant sacrifices for those he treasures, Heloise wrote with some wryness.

“I cannot be important to him. I’m nothing but a rooftop prowler,” Elle said.

But you are important to him, Bernadine wrote.

“Why?”

Only His Greatness can answer that question, Heloise said, spinning her slate for Elle to see.

Bernadine eagerly scribbled away on her slate. *How do **you** feel for His Highness? Is he important to you?*

Elle stared at Bernadine. “After staying here for so long one would think I would no longer be shocked by your boldness or match making ways.”

Bernadine has the subtlety of an avalanche, Heloise wrote.

Bernadine silently chuckled, nearly bowling Heloise over on accident with her plump backside when she walked around the table to check a pot boiling over the open fire.

Heloise turned so her pronounced nose thrust in Elle’s direction. *At minimum you feel friendship for His Worthiness. You laugh and enjoy your encounters with him.*

“Yes.”

Bernadine eagerly waddled back to her slate on the table. *If the roles were reversed and it was **you** facing the mountain hag for His Highness’s sake, would you do it?*

“Of course, but that’s different. He is a sovereign. The country needs him.”

You would not try to save him for any other reason? Bernadine asked.

“I don’t know,” Elle said, eating the last bite of her bread.

Bernadine deflated in disappointment before she busied herself with sawing another slice of bread.

Heloise, however, smacked her open hand on the table, making a loud crack. *Let me tell you something, missy. You young maidens now days get misty eyed thinking about true love and the fathomless adoration you will share. It’s not like that. Real love is looking at someone and knowing that you wouldn’t mind waking up to their bad breath for the next century, and you are fine with them seeing you before you brush your hair and fix your face for the day.*

Elle blinked, surprised by the housekeeper’s sudden outburst, but Heloise wasn’t finished yet.

Loving a person isn’t a magical, sparkly passion. It’s hard work. It’s putting the other person before yourself. It’s companionship and being able to trust and depend on each other. That loquacious true love everyone spouts about is really finding a partner who will go through the heartbreaks and joys of life with you.

Heloise stopped writing only when Bernadine smacked her over the head with a wooden spoon. The housekeeper narrowed her eyes at the cook like a bird whose feathers had just been ruffled.

Be gentle, Bernadine wrote to her friend.

Heloise scoffed and finished her tea. *If you will excuse me, good evening*, she wrote before swirling from the room.

Elle and Bernadine watched her leave before Bernadine continued. *Heloise lost her husband when they were both dreadfully young. They had been married but five years. She still misses him.*

“She is right, though,” Elle said. “I am terribly unromantic. The pretty stories about beautiful girls finding true love never caught my fancy. I thought love would be useless in the real world, where merchant’s shipments are delayed by muddy roads, countries are forever eyeing each other in thoughts of war, and one must work to live. Heloise’s explanation of love is perhaps the first definition I have ever felt to be true.”

Most dwell on the feeling of love, rather than the relationship itself, Bernadine nodded.

Elle rubbed the sides of her teacup in the following silence. “Thank you for the refreshments, and for the conversation,” she said, sliding off the stool when she finished her tea.

Has it given you anything to think of?

Elle considered the question for a moment. “It has. Good night, Bernadine.”

Good night to you, Elle. Sleep well.

“I shall certainly try.”

Chapter 12

Love and Squirrels

“Do I have something on my face,” Severin said. He didn’t even look up from his book.

Elle, who was leaning against a bookshelf and watching the prince, tilted her head. “What?”

“You’ve been staring at me. Is something wrong with my face—besides the obvious?”

“Oh, no. I apologize, I was merely thinking,” Elle said, clasping her hands behind her back before meandering to Severin’s table.

Stacks of neatly piled books were posted at the corners like paper watchtowers. Maps of the border Loire shared with Arcainia were spread around the table.

Elle peered over Severin’s shoulder to study his work. “So you’ve caved and have agreed to war on Arcainia?”

Severin twisted to stare at Elle.

Elle realized her mistake and tried to downplay her knowledge of the subject. “I’m just speculating. Your brother has been fairly vocal about the desire in the past year.”

Severin massaged his forehead. “Even his *servants* know? It is no wonder Arcainia decided spy infiltration was a necessary measure.”

“Only a minority know, if that’s any consolation,” Elle said.

“Servants talk. As soon as one of them knows, all of them know,” Severin sourly said. “And I say that without meaning any offense to you.”

“None taken,” Elle said, plunking down in a chair next to Severin.

“And no, I have not given in. I’m looking for a way to talk my brother out of a war,” Severin said. “Loire cannot handle a war right now, not to mention there is no reason for one.”

“He won’t accept that reasoning?”

“No.”

“And you won’t flat out reject the idea?”

“He’s my brother. I would like to support him in everything he does.”

“Even if he does something stupid?”

Severin turned his cat head to give Elle another unnerving stare.

“I am *not* saying His Highness is stupid, or has done something stupid. I’m merely wondering what you will do if he asks you for something truly asinine,” Elle asked.

Severin sighed. “I do not know.”

Elle planted her elbows on the table surface and propped up her chin with her hands. She watched Severin half heartedly nudge a map, again scrutinizing the cursed prince.

Heloise’s passionate sermon had aroused an ill-fated curiosity in Elle. She surely was not in love with Severin, but she wondered what kind of woman would be attracted to the prince.

To find the answer to this predicament, Elle keenly studied Severin. The results were rather unfortunate.

Elle observed that Severin was surprisingly calm tempered. He was difficult to anger—excluding matters of rubbing leaves and Jock—and after one got past his rocky exterior he was thoughtful and gentle. Some might see his sense of humor as being ill mannered in its sourness, but Elle found his remarks not only diverting but true.

His loyalty was bottomless, which surely meant he was trustworthy, and Elle was willing to admit that she admired the guardianship he seemed to extend over all he held dear. He was proud, yes, but not unduly so considering his social standing and intelligence. Perhaps his only real fault that Elle found aggravating was his tendency to dote on his brother and work at all hours of the day.

If love was as Heloise said, and was about finding a partner to go through the tribulations and delights of life, whatever woman snared Prince Severin would be lucky indeed. In fact, Elle was likely to be jealous of her.

Elle realized what she was thinking and paused. “Fantastic,” she said before glaring at Severin, mad at him for the nobility of his temperament.

“What?” Severin asked, not looking up from his work.

“Nothing,” Elle said, her voice was flat as she removed her eyes from the prince and stared across the library. Thanks to her regrettable curiosity, Elle was forced to admit that *she* was the kind of woman who would fall in love—real love—with Severin. And, even more regrettably, it seemed that she already had fallen for him.

Elle glared at Severin again in a rare show of rage. She had been perfectly happy before her realization. Why did Severin have to be so likeable? Surely this was his fault.

“What have I done?” Severin asked.

Elle froze, afraid he had read her thoughts. “What?”

“You are glaring at me like a gargoyle. What did I do to anger you?” Severin asked, making a notation on a map.

Elle looked away. “Nothing.”

Severin snorted in amusement and disbelief.

Elle folded her arms across her belly and thought. Out of all people why would it be **Prince Severin** to catch her fancy where no one else had? The notion was ridiculous considering what he had done to her family. The situation was so ironic it made Elle laugh out loud.

“Do you need something? Tea perhaps?” Severin asked, taking a book off the top of the tower of manuscripts at his elbow.

“No,” Elle said.

She was mistaken, that had to be it. She wasn’t in love with Severin. It was just because Heloise had put the mad notion in her head.

“Elle.”

Elle’s thoughts stopped when Severin slid a furry, thick finger under her chin, tilting it so she had to look at him. “Are you certain you are feeling well? Do you need to be aired out?” he asked, his deep voice colored with a faint tease.

Nope. She wasn’t mistaken.

“I’m fine, Severin, but thank you for your concern,” Elle said, giving the prince a small smile.

Satisfied, Severin dropped Elle’s chin and returned to his work.

Elle watched him for a few moments, her smile growing larger and softer. Perhaps it was ridiculous, but Elle couldn’t help but think she couldn’t have chosen a better man to fall for.

Elle froze when she realized what her affection meant. Because she loved him she could break Severin’s curse! ...But that would mean the end of this. Severin would never love a commoner, and as soon as the curse was broken he would return to the palace and to his brother. If he didn’t forget about her he would likely find out what she really was, and then there was *no* chance he would love her.

Elle leaned over the table, sheltering her eyes with her hands.

She was startled when she felt something on her back. It took her a moment to realize it was Severin, running a hand through her loose hair.

He did so almost unconsciously. He glanced at Elle for a moment to gravely study her before he again looked back at his book, still running a hand through her hair.

“I will have to do it,” Elle whispered.

Severin’s ears flicked, but he said nothing.

Elle knew in her heart that she couldn’t leave Severin cursed because of her selfishness. She loved him—and all of his servants—so much that she wanted them to be free. Even if it meant she would lose them.

But she didn’t have to break it today, or even tomorrow. There was still time to enjoy her stay at Chanceux Chateau. She could treasure her moments with Severin and her friends among his staff.

Elle laid her head down on the table and closed her eyes as Severin continued to stroke her hair, lulling her off to sleep.



Elle was pulled from her slumber by someone shaking her awake. It was early in the morning, the sun was only hinting at rising and the room was chilly as Elle had neglected to close the window after her colleague checked in with her in the late evening hours.

“What is it, Emele?” Elle asked, propping herself up on her elbows.

Emele pointed across the room with a shaking hand.

Sitting in front of the fireplace was a ragged looking squirrel. Its eyes were bugged, and the fur on its tail was patchy, but it looked snug nestled into the fluff it had pulled from the now ruined rug.

“It must have climbed in the open window. Sorry about that,” Elle said, wincing when Emele smacked her on the head with her slate.

WHY did you leave the window open?

“It was stuffy,” Elle said, making sure Jock was securely asleep. Elle knew the fat dog wouldn’t be able to catch the squirrel, but she didn’t want to invite chaos. “Open the balcony door and we can shoo the squirrel out.”

Emele looked unconvinced. She hefted herself on Elle’s formidable bed and crawled across it—her skirts taking up nearly the entire surface—to reach the door on the other side of the room. She opened the door and

retreated to Elle's bed while Elle stood—shivering in the cold—and grabbed one of her long abandoned crutches.

"Time for you to leave," Elle said to the squirrel, thumping the crutch on the floor before edging towards the creature.

The squirrel chattered at her but didn't move.

"Leave," Elle said, nudging the intruder with her crutch.

The squirrel moved about an inch when Elle grew more forceful with her prods. Elle got it to stray to the edge of the rug when the squirrel turned and launched itself on top of the crutch. It ran up the wooden length and latched onto Elle's hand, biting one of her fingers.

Elle yelped, dropped the crutch, and whipped her hand, sending the squirrel flying. As the squirrel hit the ground with a thump Elle jumped backwards. "That hurt," she grimaced when her healed leg protested at the sudden movement.

The squirrel made more angry sounds.

Elle retreated to her bed with Emele. "Wretched beast. New plan, get Severin. He can chase it out. Could you get me a bandage? I'm bleeding most impressively."

Emele nodded and rolled off the bed, crushing half her skirts. She was almost to the door when Elle realized what she was wearing.

"Wait, don't get Severin. Get the kitchen cat."

Are you mad? A cat is not going to chase off a squirrel!

"Then get a footman, just don't get Severin."

Why? He is the only male with a voice in the whole household!

Elle briefly covered his eyes. "I don't want to face him with a bit hand in my dressing gown."

The squirrel angrily chattered and climbed a chair, perching on the back of it.

"Forget it, get Severin," Elle said, wrapping herself in a coverlet.

Emele disappeared from the room, and Elle clutched a drowsy Jock to her chest as she stared the squirrel down. The squirrel hopped off the chair and returned to its nest of shredded rug. It moved with alarming swiftness, streaking forward like lightning.

Elle was standing on the bed, still cradling Jock—who was making her arms fall asleep—when Severin entered the room.

"Emele tells me you are under siege," the cursed prince said, joining Elle at her bedside.

“It’s over there,” Elle said, nodding her head at the squirrel as she struggled to hold Jock. Jock squirmed and barked at Severin, wriggling in Elle’s arms.

“And why were you unable to convince it to make an exit?” Severin said.

“It bit me.”

“It *what*?”

“Have you ever been bitten by a squirrel?”

“No.”

“Don’t. It hurts more than one would expect.”

“I thought all maidens were supposed to have an almost magical way with animals,” Severin said, folding his arms across his chest.

“I do not know what sort of books you read as a child, but they must have been ridiculous if they made you believe that,” Elle said. “Now would you please remove the squirrel from my room?”

“I’m still amused you called for assistance. A squirrel may be a difficult foe, but I assume it can’t be much worse than the mountain hag.”

Elle rolled her eyes. “Severin.”

“Very well. And exactly how did you think I would be able to relieve you of this pest any better than one of the other servants?” Severin asked.

“The fact that you have the head of a cat,” Elle dryly said.

“True. I concede,” Severin said before striding across the room. He positioned himself in a straight line from both the squirrel and the open door.

Elle shivered as a few flakes of snow fluttered into her room, and Jock rocketed out of her arms when Severin roared. He sounded like a snarling lion. The noise was deafening and frightening.

Severin scared all occupants of the room, except himself. The squirrel ran from the chateau like a cat being chased by a dog. Jock fell on Elle’s bed and struggled to his paws before he hopped off the bed and ran across the room to bark at Severin’s feet. Elle dropped her coverlet and leaped off the bed, slamming her balcony door shut.

“Your leg is doing quite well,” Severin said, fiddling with the cuffs of his waistcoat and ignoring Jock. “I will see you after you are... dressed.”

Elle seated herself on her bed with the presence of a queen. “Yes.”

Severin's fangs flashed when he smiled. "Until then. I trust a squirrel will not attack you in my absence," he said, escaping the room before Elle could reply.

"That man. Emele, where are you? I request aid with dressing," Elle shouted.



After enduring a morning and afternoon of squirrel related mockery from Severin, Elle stared at her wardrobe with narrowed eyes.

Something wrong, Elle? Emele wrote.

Elle started unwinding the bandage Duval had swaddled her hand in. "Not particularly."

Aggravated by His Highness?

"Yes," Elle woodenly said, admiring her less than impressive wound from her battle with the squirrel. "For all that I bled you think this bite mark would be bigger."

Emele placed her hand on top of Elle's and pushed it down so Elle looked up at her. *If you wish to get back at His Highness I have the perfect thing.*

"What is it?"

A dress.

"A dress? How is a dress going to silence him?"

Just wait and see. Come. We will dress you for war.



Elle doubted the success of Emele's promise, but after she swept into the dining room she held the ladies maid in higher esteem.

Severin had his chin resting on a hand and was drumming the table with his free hand when Elle made her entrance. Severin saw her and froze. His hand slid out from under his chin and dropped to the table like a wet noodle. He stood, his amber eyes popping as Elle walked to her chair.

Emele's selection was a dress made with the rose red brocade that had caused such a stir among the female servants at Elle's dress fitting. It was an elegant creation that was fancier than any of her other dresses. It was adorned with cloth folded and bunched to resemble roses and the skirt was layered, giving it the appearance of flower petals. During the dress

fitting Elle didn't understand why everyone fawned over the material. Now, armed with the knowledge that Severin was smitten for all things green and growing and that his servants were cunning to the highest degree, Elle suspected Severin's favorite flower was the classic rose.

Judging by his stunned expression, Elle was right.

For the triumphant occasion Emele had pinned Elle's hair to the side of her head so her black hair hung over one shoulder. Several cloth roses were pinned into Elle's hair, continuing the flower theme.

Elle sat down after a footman pulled out a chair for her, smiling when she saw that Severin still wore a shocked look.

Severin recovered, fixing his feline face in an unreadable expression. "You look lovely," he said as he sat down.

"Thank you," Elle smiled mischievously.

"I'm curious to know how Emele talked you into allowing such a formal dress."

"She didn't exactly give me a choice. The day they selected color swatches was the only day I interacted with your seamstress. I did not know they were making such a dress until one day it mysteriously appeared in my wardrobe."

"It suits you," Severin said, his eyes glittering. His voice was warm with affection, and serious in its every tone.

Elle's smile slipped from her lips at Severin's sincerity. "Thank you," she said, holding his gaze.

The moment was broken when the servants placed platters on the table, unable to delay serving Severin and Elle any longer.

Elle started her dinner with a selection of pineapple—she had become fond of the tasty fruit. "I am surprised, I thought you would surely inquire after my battle scar," Elle wryly said.

"Hm?" Severin said, blinking.

"My squirrel bite?"

"Normally I would not hesitate to discuss the particulars of your wound, but I was going to allow my illegitimate, if not good, breeding to prevail this once and let the topic remain untouched."

"I find your sudden change in heart unlikely," Elle said.

"Oh?"

"You spent the afternoon offering me nuts."

“I was being considerate that you may have experienced a change in tastes after being bitten. Haven’t you heard of werewolves?”

“An angry squirrel is hardly a werewolf.”

“One never knows. Magic *is* growing unruly.”

“We did see a mountain hag just days after the first snowfall,” Elle said, some of the laughter and outrage draining from her voice.

Severin ate a slice of venison. “Yes. I am no wizard, but I have noticed a change in magic. It’s barely perceivable, but...”

“But that may change soon,” Elle said.

“Yes.”

The pair was silent for a few moments as Elle thoughtfully stared at Severin. Her heart squeezed painfully as she watched him nod in thanks to a servant who refilled his wine cup. Soon she would have to leave. Soon she would need to break Severin’s curse.

The prince looked up. “What?”

“Pardon?”

“You are staring at me.”

“Well... I was just thinking,” Elle said.

“Of?” Severin prodded.

Elle shook her head. She couldn’t speak her mind yet. “You look so much like a cat it occurred to me. Do you have a tail?”

Severin dropped his silverware and stared at Elle in horror.

“It’s a natural, scientific inquiry,” Elle said, nonchalantly nibbling on a piece of pineapple.

“No, I don’t,” Severin said, vigorously renewing his interest in his food.

“I was merely curious.”

“Allow me to recommend the candied nuts. I believe you will find them to your liking.”

“Touché.”

“Indeed.”



Severin shifted, careful not to jostle Elle’s head.

The girl was stretched out next to him, her head resting on Severin’s thigh. She was awake, but just barely. Severin suspected the soft plush of

the carpet they were on and the warmth of the fireplace was going to change that shortly.

Severin glanced down at Elle when she deeply exhaled.

"This is nice," Elle said.

"Yes," Severin said after a few moments of silence. He placed a clawed hand on the crown of Elle's head.

The girl didn't even stir.

"Elle, why aren't you afraid of me?"

Elle yawned. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"My claws, my fangs."

Elle snorted. "I am more likely to turn into a were-squirrel than you are to use either of those weapons."

"You've never screamed at me, not even when you first set eyes on me."

"I would hope not. I would be a new breed of idiot if I went running around on your roof without any knowledge of what you looked like."

"Elle, I'm asking. Why?"

Elle adjusted the placement of her head on Severin's thigh. "You have never given me a reason to fear you."

Severin felt her slip off to sleep when her breathing grew deeper and muscles relaxed. When he was certain she was asleep Severin dropped his eyes to her sleeping form.

Elle was the picture of peace as she slept. Her soft, flower petal lips were curled into a smile. Her glossy hair spilled over Severin's leg like a waterfall of silk, and her skin—flawless and perfect—glowed in the firelight.

For the first time in years, the desire to be a man—to be *human*—sliced through Severin like a sword to the gut as he looked at Elle.

"I have done you a disservice, Elle," Severin murmured. "I told my brother you were plain. I was wrong. Horribly wrong. You are more beautiful than even the most stunning rose."

Severin gently touched Elle's cheek. When she did not stir he continued. "The sparkle your eyes get when you hold a mischievous thought on your tongue, the gentleness of your touch, and the peace and elegance you have that comes with being comfortable with one's own skin would take away any man's breath."

Elle's breathing was easy and unburdened, unaware of Severin's admiration of her beauty.

"Also, you smell like wild roses—which much offended me when you first arrived as I didn't think you to be worthy of the scent. But now I half wonder if it is that wild roses smell like *you*, and not the reverse," Severin said, thankful that he could praise the sleeping beauty without her knowledge. (If he admitted he had a better sense of smell than most humans, Elle was sure to imply it was because he resembled a cat.)

Severin sighed and brushed Elle's jagged—but oddly perfect in Severin's mind—bangs across her forehead with a heavy heart.

As much as he had grown to admire Elle, it was unlikely that she would be able to accomplish what countless other women had failed at. Elle would never be able to love Severin.

It was hard to forget the parade of women Lucien strung before Severin. Most of them were obvious in their lack of sincerity, but there were a few Severin had thought might be able to break his curse.

They were sweet, artless girls, and in the end they loved his possessions, his title, his inheritance, everything except himself—even though they had tried.

Now it hurt to hope. And Severin felt the increasing weight of his servants' expectations every day.

Severin closed his eyes. "You are beautiful, Elle, and I am grateful for your companionship. But even you could not be so noble as to fall in love with a beast."

Chapter 13

The Plot of Arcainia

When the courier arrived four days later Severin was on his way to the library.

“Your Highness!”

Severin turned around, shocked by the sound of another human voice besides Elle and his own in the normally quiet chateau.

Burke and a courier—dressed appropriately for the weather and dusted in a thin layer of snow—hustled down the hallway.

Burke ran straight up to Severin, but his companion dallied for a moment, shaking in fear.

“I am in my right mind. I will not harm you,” Severin dryly said after the courier took a step backwards.

The courier pushed his scarf down his face and bobbed forward in a quick bow. “I apologize, Your Highness. I have an important communication from your brother, Prince Lucien,” the courier said, trembling as he held out a sealed letter.

Severin took the letter and inspected the seal before ripping it open, glancing at the courier when he retreated several feet down the hallway before reading the letter.

My Dear Brother,

I fear I have bad news to share. Two of my Rangers captured another spy from Arcainia. This spy was in possession of a coded message addressed to the assassins’ guild of Verglas.

The guild has been hired to eliminate you. Of course the message does not say this outright—and when we confront Arcainia I have no doubt they will claim they intercepted the orders and would have informed us if we had not detained their spy.

We do not know the date or time the assassins will attack, but I expect it will be soon. I am sending an army squad to Chanceux Chateau. They will arrive a few hours after you receive this letter.

Severin crumpled the letter, unable to read the rest. Severin knew the communication should send him scurrying to work—checking the defenses of the chateau, warning the servants, preparing for the army—but all of Severin’s thoughts and concerns focused on one thing: Elle.

He had to get her out.

“Burke, take this thing to the kitchens, see that he is warmed and given nourishment,” Severin said, indicating the frightened courier. “Alert Emele that Elle will be leaving today and needs to be dressed for riding in this weather. *Now*. Send Marc to my study immediately, tell Heloise to bring me the treasury accounts, and have Oliver saddle Fidele and a fresh horse for the messenger,” Severin growled before he holed himself up in his study.

He worked quickly, recognizing that he may as well take care of Elle first so he could concentrate on the remaining tasks. He needed to see that everyone in his household would be safe. He had no doubts the assassins would leave his servants alone—if they did make an attempt it would be quick, trying to off Severin and disappear before anyone noticed. Severin knew his servants would support him, and he welcomed their help. But Elle... he would take no chances with Elle. Elle would have to leave.

Marc arrived immediately. Severin explained the situation to him, and the two men studied a detailed map of the chateau grounds, determining where to station the soldiers when they arrived.

Heloise entered and left after arguing via a slate with Severin for some minutes. She returned, carrying a leather pack and a sour expression, but Severin ignored it and took the pack before he swept off to the chateau main hall where Elle—wearing enough clothes to comfortably ride out a blizzard—stood with her hands on her hips in the middle of a gaggle of servants.

“Severin, what is going on?” Elle asked. “I was in the middle of reading a delightful book—anyone who tells you I was sleeping is mistaken—when Emele wrenched me into my room and dressed me for mountain climbing.”

“You are returning to the palace,” Severin said.

“What?”

“Today you return to Noyers,” Severin said, looking to Burke. “Has the courier rested?”

Sufficiently enough.

“Bring him out here,” Severin said.

“You’re sending me home,” Elle calmly said. Although her tone was amiable Severin could guess her thoughts. She thought he was abandoning her.

Severin turned to Bernadine, raising his brows at her.

Bernadine nodded in approval before she clapped her hands and bustled off, drawing all the servants—even Emele—far enough from Severin and Elle to give them a small measure of privacy.

Severin drew closer to Elle. He cupped her cheek with his hand—which dwarfed her head. “Temporarily,” he said, his voice low. “I am freeing you. Present this to whatever steward holds your bond—I’m positive it is more than enough to buy your indenture,” Severin said, presenting the pack to Elle, briefly peeling it open so Elle could see the gold coins inside. It was a lord’s ransom. Unless the crown had really taken Elle to task, she could buy at least three indentures with the money.

“Severin,” Elle said, staring at the money with wide eyes. “This is too much. I cannot allow you to do this.”

Severin cracked a smile, happy he had not been wrong about Elle. She was not enthralled with money—his money in particular. “It is not something I need your permission for. I want you to be free, Elle. Take it.”

Elle twisted her mouth in a slant, so Severin plunged on before she could argue, “Finish up your business at the palace—make sure they give you the paperwork for your servanthood *and* be certain that they seal them. Gather your possessions and return to your father and sisters,” Severin hesitated for a few moments. “Or come back here.”

“Why now? Why so sudden, Severin. Are you hiding something?”

“No.”

“Then why the big hurry?” Elle asked, folding her arms in front of her.

Severin smiled, careful not to betray a hint of worry. If Elle knew he was sending her from danger he would have to load her on Fidele, kicking and screaming. “I have my reasons.”

Elle shook her head. “That isn’t good enough. You place the well being of everyone in this castle before your own. Something is going on.”

“You sound paranoid. Nothing unanticipated is happening, I merely desire for you to be free and safe.”

“Fine, but I would rather leave tomorrow.”

“No, you are leaving *today*.”

Elle narrowed her eyes and tucked her head like a mule.

“I need you to trust me, Elle. Please, go,” Severin said.

Elle sighed. “Very well, you win. But I will be back,” she warned, tapping Severin on the chest with a finger.

Severin engulfed her hand with his. “I look forward to it.”

Elle blushed faintly and looked sideways. “We leave now?”

“You are leaving now, yes.”

“You’re not coming with?”

“I am unable to, but I have arranged for a guide,” Severin said, turning around as Burke hustled the courier from kitchen hallway.

“I am to return already? But I arrived not even an hour ago,” the courier complained as he wound a new scarf around his face.

“He doesn’t exactly inspire confidence,” Elle said.

“I apologize, the palace does not have as high of expectations as I do when it comes to staffing,” Severin said, leading the way outside.

The sun was out, and while the air was chilly there was no breeze. Oliver stood in the courtyard, holding the reins of Fidele and a spare mount.

The courier bowed to Severin before taking the spare horse from Oliver and mounting up.

“Wait, I’m riding Fidele?” Elle asked as Oliver tugged her pack of money from her and strapped it to Fidele’s saddle.”

“You are. Sit lightly.”

“Don’t you dare. *Why* am I taking Fidele? Much of the snow has melted,” Elle said, backing out of Severin’s reach.

“Because Rosemerry would not be able to keep up. In a few days I will send him after you,” Severin said.

“No. This doesn’t feel right. You’ll be stranded here if I take Fidele, what if there’s an emergency? You can’t ride any other horse. What aren’t you telling me?”

“Elle,” Severin said, halting her tirade. “Please, go.”

Elle studied Severin, meeting his eyes and facing him down. “Very well.” she said.

Severin opened his arms and Elle walked into them, squeezing Severin in a tight hug. Severin set his chin on top of her head, briefly closing his eyes. Even if she never came back, this was enough. Severin knew Elle cared for him.

“Be careful,” Elle said when he released her.

“Sit lightly,” Severin advised before lifting Elle onto Fidele’s back.

“Emele, Burke, take care. Tell the others I say farewell,” Elle called.

Emele nodded—judging by her lack of objection Burke must have filled her in. It was fortunate she hadn’t told Elle.

The courier saluted Severin. “At your orders, Milord.”

“Return to Noyers and tell my brother that I understand. Watch out for this girl, Elle. See that she gets all the way to the palace,” Severin said.

“Very well, Your Highness,” the courier said before bowing from horseback and starting off.

Elle and Fidele followed after him. At the edge of the courtyard Elle stopped. “Severin,” she shouted. “I’ll be back. I promise!” she said before cuing Fidele into a trot to catch up.

Severin watched her go, staying outside long after she had disappeared. When he finally went inside he felt a great deal more confident, and the knot of worry loosened.

His servants had assembled in the hall—for once without dramatics or sly antics. They were as serious and staunch as they were the day Severin explained the curse to them.

“I have some daunting news,” Severin announced. “Two Rangers intercepted plans for an assassination. My assassination.”



Severin rolled his stiff shoulders, nodding to the soldiers who passed him, marching down the hallway.

“Good morning, Sir,” a soldier said, approaching from the other direction.

Severin glanced at the man. “Good morning, Captain Remon.”

“I have the newest missive from your brother, Sir,” the soldier said, handing over a letter. “A courier arrived minutes ago with it.”

Severin only glanced at the letter, he saw much of what he was expecting—a complaint in Severin’s failure to send a letter with the returning courier the previous day.

“Very good, thank you,” Severin said, briefly skimming the letter before folding it and placing it in his pocket.

“Any additional orders, sir?”

“Not yet. Was the courier taken to the kitchens?”

“He was, Sir.”

“Good. I wish for him to make the return trip today, but he may have two hours to recover,” Severin said, glancing outside.

“I will see that he is informed of your desires, Sir.”

“That is all, Remon. Thank you.”

“Yessir.” The young captain snapped a salute before leaving.

Severin watched him for a few moments before he followed. Severin entered the main hall and exited the front door. He nodded when the soldiers stationed there saluted, and followed a walkway to the gardens.

The gardens swarmed with soldiers like every other part of the chateau, but they were completely devoid of plant life. Severin still found the place soothing, and he breathed in the fresh air with gusto.

He parked himself on a bench nestled into a copse, keeping his back to the trees. From his spot he could see the patrolling soldiers making the rounds.

Severin yawned. “So much for one squad,” he grumbled. “Lucien has half of the third regiment here. If the assassins make an attempt now they are either vastly underpaid, or total idiots.”

Severin wondered how long the army would have to be camped out in his grounds. Perhaps he should return to the palace for the time being. Elle was there, and the palace was swaddled in guards. Even the best assassin wouldn’t try his/her luck there.

“It would only bring trouble,” Severin supposed. “The best chance is to speak to the Arcainia monarchs so they remove the price over my head.”

A crow landed on a branch above Severin and cawed, sounding forbidding in the howling wind. Severin lurched to his feet, frowning when he didn’t see the next pair of patrolling soldiers.

A twig snapped in the trees behind Severin. The prince casually placed a hand on his rapier, lifting his nose to the wind and sniffing.

He swung around, sliding his rapier free of its scabbard. He lifted it up in the air, blocking a sword strike from a man clothed entirely in black.

Severin leaned forward, using his hulking mass to press the assassin backwards. His lips pulled away from his fangs as he opened his mouth to roar out a warning when he was hit on the head from behind.

Severin toppled over and stars exploded in his eyes. The pain was nauseating, and Severin could barely resist as the assassins dragged him

into the copse of trees.

“Cover our trail,” an assassin grunted.

Severin hung limply as the assassins pulled him by his arms. His vision started to clear when they dropped him.

Severin waited until an assassin knelt next to him to move, grabbing the man by the throat before he could react. He rolled onto his back and tossed the assassin into his cohort, sending them flying.

Severin leaped to his feet, shaking his head to clear it before facing the third assassin—who had returned from stamping out the drag marks Severin’s body had made in the ground.

Careful to listen for back up, Severin dodged a thrown dagger before leaping at the assassin like a cat pouncing on prey.

He chopped the assassin in the neck, making the fiend sag and fall to the ground. He twisted just in time to avoid a nasty strike from a recovered assassin. A roar ripped out of Severin—one that he hoped would bring the soldiers scurrying to him—before he dodged another dagger blow and grabbed the assassin by the arm.

Severin lifted the man into the air and shook him, jostling the assassin until he dropped the dagger and flopped like a rag doll. Severin then threw him on top of the recovering assassin. He swiped the dagger just in time to raise it against the assassin with the sword.

Severin greatly outmatched the assassin in strength, but Severin was also willing to bet his opponent’s weapon was coated in poison and he took no risks.

While wondering where the soldiers were, Severin roared again, letting the assassin push him back. Several times the assassin’s sword was perilously close to slicing him. The assassin even managed to slash a wad of fur off Severin and cut his waistcoat.

Severin glanced at the others assailants, who were standing again. They were holding throwing daggers, waiting for a clear shot.

Severin blocked another downward chop from the attacking assassin as he started calculating a retreat. He was close enough to the copse of trees that he thought he could duck into it.

The attacker sliced off one of Severin’s whiskers with a curved strike.

Severin was about to make a run for it when the attacking assassin stopped. His eyes went wide as he fell head first, a black arrow shaft

sticking from his back.

“Don’t move,” ordered a smooth, daunting voice that Severin recognized all too well.

Severin looked up at the newest members of the drama.

Three people wearing black stood in a row. The one on the right held a short sword; the one on the left was crouched in an offensive stance, holding a halberd thrust in front of him. The slight figure in the center carried a wicked looking crossbow and wore Elle’s face.

The remaining assassins exchanged glances. One of them discreetly adjusted his hold on his dagger. He howled in anguish when Elle shot him in the arm without blinking.

The assassins ran, the injured one holding his wound to try and staunch the blood.

“After them,” Elle said, whipping her cloak off.

Elle’s companions were gone before Elle folded her cloak and tossed it aside—still hefting her crossbow.

Beneath the cape she wore the female Ranger uniform: steely blue pauldrons and gauntlets with a matching chest piece that encased her upper body. She wore the designated Ranger boots, black leggings, and a Ranger Blue skirt that matched her armor. The silver patch over her heart was decorated with the insignia of an eagle with an arrow clenched in its beak. The eagle was Lucien’s symbol, the arrow was the signature of an intelligencer Ranger. Together the insignia meant Elle was a decorated Éclaireur Ranger, the highest intelligencer rank that could be achieved.

Chapter 14

The Intelligencer

“Severin, are you hurt? Did they harm you at all?” Elle asked, running to Severin’s side. She held her crossbow in one hand and lifted Severin’s right arm, inspecting it and Severin’s ribcage from all angles before doing the same with the left. “Severin?” she asked when he didn’t reply.

She looked up into his eyes and read the shock there. He had never guessed she was a Ranger.

“Elle, how did you get here?” he finally asked. “The road is blocked off.”

“I brought my party in through the hunting trail you pointed out on our ride,” Elle said, anxiously circling Severin to look for injuries. “But Severin, did they get you at all? Did they even knick you?”

Severin stared at Elle. “Who are you?”

“You know me. I’m Elle, your Intruder,” Elle said, forcing her lips into the mold of a smile.

Severin shook his head. “No, who are you really?”

Elle reached out and grabbed his hand. “I am Elle. Nothing’s changed Severin. I’m still the demanding busy body who was bit by a squirrel.”

In the woods behind them Prince Lucien’s personal horn sounded. The Prince wouldn’t be far off, and after he arrived all of Elle’s lies would come to light.

Elle briefly shut her eyes. “This isn’t how I planned it. I was going to wait until our next ride when I came back, but I’ve run out of time.”

“What?”

Elle grabbed Severin by the shoulders, pulling on him until he looked down at her. “Severin, listen very carefully. No matter what you learn about me I want you to know that everything I said about you is true. You are incredible, Severin, please don’t forget everything I’ve said in your anger.”

“What are you talking about?” Severin said, his voice turning into a growl.

The horn sounded again. It was much closer this time.

“I genuinely enjoyed my time here. I wouldn’t trade these last few months for the world. But I’m doing this for your sake, you deserve to be happy.”

“Elle?”

Elle could hear the muffled thunder of horses galloping through snow. She threw her arms around Severin’s neck and whispered, “Severin, I love you.”

Light flared, tearing Severin away and throwing Elle to the ground.

Elle pushed herself to her knees, wincing as Severin howled in pain. “Severin!” she screamed, her hair whipping in the sudden wind.

Severin’s bones snapped and crackled as they rearranged and reformed in his body. His teeth shrank and sank back into his gums as his protruding cat muzzle flattened. His fur retreated to his hairline or fell out entirely—Elle couldn’t tell which in the bright light.

Severin’s claws disappeared, his hands softened, and within moments the beast was gone, leaving behind a man. The man groaned and collapsed in the snow.

Elle lurched to her feet. “Severin, are you ok?” she asked, crouching next to him.

Elle held her hand an inch above Severin’s shoulder, wondering if it would hurt him if she touched him.

Her worry died when Severin pushed his hair out of his face and sat up, looking to her.

Elle recognized him from the portrait Emele had shown her in the library. He was older now, taller with broad shoulders. His charcoal black hair spilled over his shoulders, and his eyes were still amber although they had normal, circular pupils. He had wrinkles on his forehead and at the top bridge of his nose—probably from squinting and working late into the night with poor lighting. He had a full lower lip, and a stubborn chin.

He was muscled and athletic from his years as a soldier, and while he did not have the same dazzling good looks as Prince Lucien, he was undeniably aristocratic and handsome, far beyond the likes of Elle.

Severin blinked once, cracking his jaw. He traced his face with his hands before looking at his bare feet. “I’m human?”

Elle almost cried. His voice was the same, rumbling like distant peals of thunder, although she suspected he would no longer sound so guttural when angry. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m...*cold*,” Severin blinked.

Elle swallowed, forcing a smile on her lips. As happy as she was for the transformed Severin, Elle couldn’t help but feel uneasy. She had fallen in love with a droll, antisocial male. The addled prince before her looked nothing at all like her love, perhaps he would act nothing like him as well.

Elle viciously silenced her thoughts. Just because Severin was now human—an unfortunately handsome human—didn’t mean Severin wasn’t himself. “That happens when you aren’t covered in fur,” Elle said, grinding her voice into a dry tease as she stood.

Severin stood as well, wobbling as he adjusted to his body. “I’m human,” he repeated, frowning as he looked at his hands. “How?”

“Severin, you were the one who explained the curse to me,” Elle said.

Severin pushed an eyebrow up, fixing Elle with a look of unimpressed disbelief. He opened his mouth but froze. “No,” he declared after a moment.

Elle blinked, that wasn’t exactly the reaction she was expecting. “Pardon?”

“Brother!” Lucien rode up on a prancing white charger, all smiles and good cheer, with a squad of honor guards. “You’re human again! You wooed her after all didn’t you, you sly fox!”

“Lucien.” Severin said.

Lucien swung off his horse, carelessly leaving it loose for a servant to scramble after. He hugged Severin, smacking his half brother on the back. “Well done, not bad for a day’s work! You can’t believe how glad I am to see you again—the real you! Blast, how I have missed you in the palace. Finally life will be bearable again, but we can celebrate later. Your still may be in danger. The assassins have been taken care of? Don’t just stand there, report in,” Lucien said, turning around to face Elle.

Elle lowered her head in deference. “The assassins had three parties around the chateau perimeter. One attacked soldiers patrolling the pathway nearest to Severin, another set up a diversion in the courtyard, the third group attacked Severin. One assassin was killed and another was injured.

Vie and Aubery are chasing the injured assassin and his companion. I split up the rest of my team to take care of the other assassins.”

“Well done, well done indeed,” Lucien beamed, not at Elle but Severin.

“Lucien, what’s going on?” Severin said, shifting from foot to foot in the snow.

“You haven’t figured it out? The change back must have addled your mind, Severin. In any case, brother, allow me to introduce you to Ranger Seventy Eight, your intruding houseguest.”

Severin stared at Elle, and Elle forced herself to meet his gaze. She had purposely kept him and his household in the dark. She owed it to him to face the consequences with dignity.

Even so, Elle felt her heart break as she watched Severin—before her very eyes—grow as stony and cold.

“Ranger Seventy Eight?” he said, proving Elle wrong as his voice did retain a little of the growl.

“Yes, it’s why she was indisposed for so long. She was stranded in your house, recovering and—thankfully—falling in love,” Lucien said, rocking forward and backward on the balls of his feet.

“You assigned *Rangers* to me?” Severin said.

“Yes. There were two stationed at the chateau most of the time. I wasn’t going to leave you unguarded in this godforsaken manor, Severin. Usually I used combat trained Rangers, but Ranger Seventy Eight was available at the time and none of my combat Rangers were,” Lucien shrugged. “So, how does it feel to be human again?” he brightly asked.

Severin would not be distracted. “You had her stationed at the chateau. Was this a set up, falling through the roof and staying with me?” Severin demanded, running a hand through his hair.

“No, the rooftop incident was Ranger Seventy Eight’s clumsiness,” Lucien said. “I was most displeased about that. I was planning to send her to Arcainia for an infiltration assignment after she finished her two week stint of guarding you. But she wasn’t a total failure. She *did* fall for you.”

Elle wished she could sink into the ground, or sock Prince Lucien in the face. His blasé manner was going to make everything worse. Elle shifted, accidentally drawing attention to herself.

“Oh. I forgot about you. You can go. Check in with the rest of your team or something,” Lucien said.

Elle looked at Severin, but he wouldn't even glance at her.

"What are you waiting for? Go," Lucien said, his voice growing frosty.

Elle bobbed forward in a bow before she retreated. She blew her silver whistle—which hung from a leather cord around her neck—three times before untying Fidele from the tree she had secured him to. She may as well take him back to the stables while she waited for her team to reorganize.

Elle led Fidele through the snow, winding her way around the gardens. She teared up when the big gelding affectionately nudged her.

The courtyard buzzed with soldiers. Elle saw a flash of a Ranger uniform, one of her fellows was leading a tied and gagged assassin off, a squad of soldiers trailing behind them.

"Elle?"

Elle turned to the chateau front door. Oliver stood on the top steps, his mask gone and his face bright with joy.

"It is you! Elle!" Oliver whooped, throwing himself down the first stair.

He was stopped by Emele, who hauled him back by the collar of his jacket. The ladies maid was truly lovely. Her skin was smooth like porcelain, her features were fine and perfectly proportionate, and her eyes were fastened on Elle.

"Elle?" Emele said. Her voice was just how Elle imagined it, soft and warm. The ladies maid traced Elle's uniform, and unlike Oliver she understood its implications. "You *lied*?"

"It's not what you think," Elle said.

"You're a Ranger. Were you tasked with infiltrating the chateau?"

"No, breaking my leg was an accident," Elle said.

"What else did you lie about?" Emele demanded.

"Nothing."

"I can't even *begin* to believe that. Is your name even Elle?"

"It is. Emele, you're jumping to conclusions. I—,"

"Jumping to conclusions? You are a lapdog of the *Crown*," Emele said, her words as painful to Elle as a hot brand. "Your duty is to lie. I can't even be sure I know you! Does His Highness know?"

"He does now."

“Then you have broken his heart, lapdog. Everything you did was a lie!”

“Get your head on straight, Emele,” Elle snapped. “If it was a lie you wouldn’t be able to speak to me right now.”

Emele shook her head and backed up to the Chateau doors. “Do not talk to me. Come, Oliver. Let’s go inside.”

“Elle?” Oliver ventured, straining against Emele when she tried to pull him along.

Elle offered the stable boy a weak smile.

“*Don’t*,” Emele thundered before pushing Oliver away. When the groom was safely stowed inside, Emele turned back to face Elle one more time. “I liked you, Elle. You were my friend. How could you do this to His Highness?”

“I didn’t do anything. I genuinely love him. Emele, you have to believe me.”

Emele shook her head. “No, I don’t. I would never believe someone who could lie to His Highness,” she said before also slipping inside, shutting the doors behind her.

Elle clenched her eyes shut and bit her tongue to keep from crying. “I knew this is what would happen,” Elle said. “I knew it, but it’s worth it. They’re free now. Severin is free, Emele is free. I just want them to be happy.”

Fidele lipped Elle’s hair, jolting her back to the present. “Right, let’s get you stabled,” she said, leading Fidele towards the barn.

She glanced over her shoulder, just in time to see Oliver pressed against a window pane. The small groom waved before he was yanked away from the window by an adult.



Two weeks later Elle was in the palace to hand in her last report detailing the assassination attempt against Severin to Farand —the head Ranger who reported directly to Prince Lucien.

Severin and his household had returned to the palace. Banquets and balls had been thrown every day since Severin’s homecoming. Elle had seen only glances of him, and nothing at all of his servants.

Elle trekked across the courtyard wearing a black cloak over her Ranger uniform. The hood was pulled up, and she almost missed the

tentative call.

“Elle?”

Elle turned to see Oliver, holding Fidele’s reins and standing under the stable overhang to escape the falling snow.

Elle smiled, heartened that at least one of Severin’s servants hadn’t rejected her. “Hello, Oliver.”

Oliver beamed. He took a step forward but stopped when Severin said, “Thank you, Oliver, you may return indoors.” The tall prince stepped out of the shadows of the barn to take Fidele’s reins. He was dressed for riding, wearing black boots, leather gloves, and his shiny hair was pulled back in a straight, orderly ponytail.

Oliver sketched a bow to Severin before he scurried back inside the stable, leaving Severin and Elle alone.

Severin stared at Elle with flat, lifeless eyes. The warmth Elle had grown accustomed to was gone. There was nothing there except for distrust and aversion.

Elle hesitated before she curtsied.

“Your pony has been brought to the stables.”

Elle looked up from her curtsy. “Pardon?”

“Your pony has been brought to the stables,” Severin repeated, his voice cold and impersonal.

“Do you mean Rosemerry?” Elle asked.

Severin briefly flattened his lips. “Yes.”

“You’re still giving him to me?”

“I do not go back on my word, even to those who are dishonorable.”

Elle flinched, but said nothing to defend herself.

“Was there anything you didn’t lie about? You obviously aren’t an indentured servant. I imagine your family doesn’t live in the country—if you even *have* a family.”

Elle swallowed and kept her chin up.

“Why, Elle. Why did you do it?”

“Why did I lie?”

“Why did worm your way into my life and lead my servants astray? Why did you befriend me under false pretenses? Did Lucien order you to?”

“Severin, my affection for you is real. If it wasn’t it would not have broken the curse. Why does no one seem to understand this except for your *brother*?” Elle said.

“Lucien sees only what he wants to see.”

“What? What does that have to do with anything? Your curse was that a girl had to fall in love with you. I did. I told you so and your curse was broken,” Elle said.

Severin shook his head. “No.”

“*WHY* are you being so stubborn when the evidence is staring at you in the mirror? Do you think your servants no longer have masks because I was able to trick *magic* with lies?”

“Silence!” Severin roared, sounding much as he did when he was a beast. Fidele shied from him, snorting and tossing his head. “Leave.”

“What?”

“Leave the palace. You have no reason to be here anymore as I gave you enough money to live comfortably on for the remainder of your life. Leave, and never return. I never want to see your face again. I have no use for faithless liars,” Severin snarled before mounting Fidele and riding off.

Elle’s shoulders shook, and she turned to watch Severin disappear through the gates before she fled to the stables.

Rosemerry neighed when he saw her. Elle ran to him, startling the pony when she threw herself into his stall and hung her arms around his neck. She cried into his soft mane, muffling her sobs. The pony good naturedly bore it as Elle wept in frustration and pain.

It hurt to be misunderstood. It hurt to be rejected.

Elle almost jumped when something pulled on her cloak.

It was Oliver. “I believe you, Elle.”

Elle smiled, brushing tears off her face so they wouldn’t freeze. “Thank you. That means the world to me,” she said, patting Rosemerry to reassure the fat pony. She glanced at the pony before returning her attention to the stable boy. “Oliver, would you do me a favor?”

“Anything for you, Elle.”

“I’m going on a long journey, and I won’t be back for weeks, maybe months. I can’t take Rosemerry with me.”

“I will take care of him,” Oliver volunteered. “His Highness paid his board and feed for a year. I will groom him and see that he is fed.”

“Thank you, Oliver,” Elle said, stroking Rosemerry’s forehead. “If I am unable to return... he is yours.”

“It’s another mission, isn’t it,” Oliver said, his voice shaking.

“What?” Elle asked.

“Your journey, it’s a Ranger assignment. A dangerous one,” Oliver said, his voice almost accusing—but with fear, not anger.

Elle hesitated. “Yes,” she finally said. “It’s an important mission, there’s a lot at stake.”

“But you don’t have to do it,” Oliver protested.

“I do,” Elle said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Oliver, but I *must* do this.”

Oliver hugged Elle. “Why? Why do you hafta leave? Why doesn’t His Highness believe you? It’s obvious that you love ‘im.”

“Sometimes adults quarrel over silly things, and we are too proud to make amends.”

“Being an adult sounds painful,” Oliver muttered, pulling back from the hug.

“Love can be painful,” Elle agreed. “But it is worth it. I promise. Thank you, Oliver, for believing in me and for caring for Rosemerry.”

Oliver nodded and rubbed his eyes.

Elle sighed. “I had better go. Take care, Oliver. I am so glad I finally got to hear your voice,” Elle smiled before she left the stall, leaving the groom and pony together.

Oliver thoughtfully looked up at the pony. “Adults quarrel over silly things, but not *all* adults. There’s one adult who is always right, and who everyone respects. I wonder, can we find her?”



Two months had passed since Severin last saw Elle in the courtyard before she returned home. It was the middle of winter and Severin was stuck in Lucien’s private study—avoiding their father and listening to Lucien make hints about a war against Arcainia.

“Father actually went ahead and suggested an arranged marriage between our countries in a communication with Arcainia’s king, can you believe that?” Lucien complained. “He is set that I marry that trumped up princess.”

“What was their response?”

“A short letter from the crown prince.”

“And?”

“He said absolutely not.”

“So why are you complaining?” Severin asked, paging through Ranger records.

“He said I wasn’t good enough! The letter was quite abusive, actually.”

Severin glanced up. “What do you care? It means you don’t have to marry the princess.”

“Not necessarily. The crown prince said they could probably scrounge up a duchess or something for me to marry. I thought that would offend Father, but he’s jumping at the chance like a drooling dog,” Lucien said, sounding disgusted.

Severin returned to thumbing through Ranger files. “That is because he is afraid you are going to bring ruin upon all of us by insisting on a war.”

“I’m not going to bring *ruin*. A war will hardly *ruin* us, especially because we will win. What are you doing?”

“I’m checking to see which Rangers are on active assignments.”

“Why?”

“If we have any that are waiting for an assignment I would like to send one out to track down my servant.”

“Are you nattering about that again? I told, stop worrying already. It’s just a stable boy, easily replaced.”

“*His* name is Oliver and he is an orphan. He has no place to go,” Severin said.

“He obviously does since he’s been gone for over a month,” Lucien said.

“That’s why I want to send a Ranger after him.”

“Give it up, Severin. You sent out a huge search party after he initially disappeared. He’s long gone now,” Lucien said, marching across the room in ridiculously frilly shoes.

Severin froze when he came to a Ranger record. “Lucien,” Severin said, his voice dangerously quiet.

“Hm?”

“Why is Ranger Seventy Eight on active duty?”

“Oh, that Elle girl? She volunteered for one last mission before retiring. You really messed up, you know, when you gave her that money to pay off her debts,” Lucien said. “She’s the best intelligencer we’ve got. Now we’ll have to train a new one and that is going to take ages.”

“What?”

“Come on, I know that pack of gold came from you. She said as much when she came barging in here the night you sent her back.”

Severin stood up. “She was indentured to us?”

“Don’t you remember? You were the one who made the arrangement,” Lucien said, stopping in front of a bookshelf. He slid a leather bound logbook off the shelf and paged through it. “Here we go. Her father was a merchant who did some scouting for us on the sly. When all three of his ships went down he was bankrupt. We paid off his debts and bought him a cottage in the country in return for Ranger Seventy Eight’s service—she was accompanying him on all of his trips anyway, he was raising her to the business.”

Severin took the book and skimmed the pages as he sank back in his chair. He propped his forearms on the desk in front of him as his heart twitched while he read the terms of Elle’s indenture. When she had first started out no one suspected how good she would be, so her terms were fairly loose. After it became apparent that she was a master at infiltrating enemy strongholds and ferreting out information without notice, Severin took her family for everything he could get, squeezing funds out of them to lengthen Elle’s contract.

He never met Ranger Seventy Eight, although he had filled out the paperwork for her indenture. He hadn’t even read up on her so he never noted she was female, only that she always produced results.

Severin wondered at Elle’s acting ability. She knew who was responsible for her contract—he would have signed it before her. How was she able to smile and chatter and pretend around him, the man responsible for her being little more than a slave?

Severin threw the logbook aside and pulled Elle’s file out, reading the description of her current mission. “WHAT?” he roared, standing up so quickly he sent his chair flying.

“What’s wrong now?” Lucien asked.

“She’s infiltrating the Verglas assassin’s guild!”

“Yes. No one was very keen on taking that assignment. I was relieved when she volunteered to stay on and complete it.”

“She could be killed,” Severin said, slamming his fist on the desk surface.

“So?” Lucien blinked.

Severin could have happily strangled his brother at that moment. This willingness seemed to show in his darkening expression because Lucien hastily back tracked.

“I mean, why do you care? You’ve sent her on dozens of deadly missions before and never thought twice about it,” he clarified.

“You are an idiot,” Severin said, leaving the room.

“What? Hey, you forgot my proposed budget for the army next year. Severin?” Lucien called.

Severin ignored his brother and stalked down the hallway. He needed to get to his rooms. He needed to *think*.

He reached his quarters with great relief, sinking into the sofa of his personal sitting room. He glanced at the wall, where the ornate magic mirror was perched. Very little of Severin’s study had been transported to the palace—Severin wasn’t positive he wanted to live in the palace, but the chateau was haunted by memories of Elle—but the mirror had made the precarious journey.

Severin studied it. He had used it several times to look for Oliver to no avail. He hadn’t thought to use it until a scant week ago, and for some odd reason the mirror didn’t respond whenever Severin asked to see him. He hoped it wasn’t because the young groom was dead.

Severin was driven from his thoughts when there was a knock at the door. “Someone is here to see you, Your Highness,” Burke said, poking his head in the room.

“Show them in.”

Burke opened the door, and Oliver jumped through.

“I found her, Your Highness! I found her! I couldn’t hardly believe it, she was real hard to track down, but now she’s here and she’ll fix *everything*,” Oliver said.

“Oliver, calm down. Where have you been? I’ve been sending soldiers and search parties all over Loire looking for you. What possessed you to leave without warning?” Severin said, scowling at the sheepish boy.

“He was looking for me.”

Severin looked to the newest member of the party and gravely bent over in a bow when he realized who it was. “My lady.”

“There’s no need to bow. I am an enchantress, not nobility,” said Angelique, the enchantress who had returned Severin’s sanity to him and saved his servants from disappearing.

She was still breathtaking and lovely, beautiful enough to be the envy of every woman in Loire, but as Severin stared at her radiant beauty he thought—for just one moment—longingly of unruly black hair and lips formed in smiles that were too wide for polite society.

“I disagree. One with your standing deserves every display of respect,” Severin said.

“Severin, what is wrong?” Angelique said. “You are human again, every joy in life should be yours. Why is your heart heavy?”

Severin looked away from Angelique, unable to face her. “Oliver, find Bernadine and report in to her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Oliver said before leaving the study, glancing over his shoulder.

“You have a loyal servant in that one. It takes a lot of courage to track an enchantress across two countries,” Angelique said.

“He has more courage than I would wish for him to possess,” Severin dryly said.

Angelique smiled. “Perhaps, but it speaks loudly of his love for you... and for this Elle he has told me so much about.”

Severin briefly shut his eyes.

“Severin, what happened? Something must have gone terribly wrong to make you so miserable. Please, explain.”

“Elle, the girl Oliver told you about. She won over my servants before attempting to befriend me.”

“And that is a bad thing?”

“She is a liar. Everything she told me was a lie.”

“Everything?”

Severin hesitated. Once Elle was revealed to be an intelligencer, Severin doubted everything. He didn’t think she was indentured, or that her family lived in the country. But his conversation with Lucien had proved she was telling the truth in all those instances. “No, not everything. But she did not tell me she was employed by my brother.”

“And what does her livelihood have to do with your curse?” Angelique gently asked.

Severin was silent for a long time. “She didn’t love me,” he finally admitted. “She was just like every other woman who loved my wealth or family.”

“That cannot be.”

“But it is!” Severin said. “Her love was nothing but a *lie*.”

“But your curse—,”

“The curse broke because I fell in love with her! My servants know it, I know it. Our curse was removed not because Elle loved me, but because I loved her, and she does not return my love,” Severin said, clenching his hands. “I didn’t fall in love with any of those other women, although Heaven knows I tried. But Elle...I knew I loved her the moment before I realized she was a liar.”

“Oh, Severin,” Angelique said, placing a warm hand on his shoulder. “I am so sorry.”

“Yes. Now you know,” Severin said squaring his shoulders, putting his emotion behind him.

“No,” Angelique said, shaking her head. “I am sorry. I must not have explained your curse well enough. In order to break the spell that doomed you to live as a beast, you had to fall in love with a girl **and** she had to fall in love with you. It was not one or the other.”

Severin hesitated. “You mean...?”

Angelique nodded. “Because your curse broke I know not only do you love Elle, but Elle deeply loves you.”

Angelique’s explanation shocked Severin to his core. He had never thought Elle *really* loved him. It was like the floor had fallen out from under him. “What have I done?” Severin said.

“Oliver tells me she has gone on a journey?”

“A mission. She’s a Ranger, an intelligencer,” Severin said.

“You don’t know where she is?” Angelique asked.

Severin shook his head. “I know what she was sent to do, but I’ll never be able to find her.”

“Ridiculous. Of course you will. You have a magic mirror,” Angelique said, walking up to the full length looking glass.

“I’m not certain it works anymore. I tried having it display Oliver, but it wouldn’t.”

“That’s because he was with me, and I shield my presence from all kinds of magical tools. But Elle will not have that same protection. Mirror, show me this Elle girl that Prince Severin is in love with.”

Severin held back a scoff at the description of Elle, but he was at Angelique’s side in a second when the glass swirled before displaying a disheartening image.

It was Elle, clutching the leg she had broken and leaning against a bare tree. She turned to peer around it, buffeted by snow and wind, before darting to take cover beneath a bush. She reached into a small pouch tied to her belt and took out bandages, wrapping a nasty looking wound on her arm.

“Is that her?” Angelique asked.

“Yes,” Severin tightly said. “But how can I find her? She could be anywhere.”

A tiny frown spread on Angelique’s lips. “You mean you don’t know how to use this?” she asked, gesturing at the mirror.

“I apologize, I don’t understand.”

Angelique turned back to the mirror. “Mirror, show me the area this Elle girl that Prince Severin is in love with is in.”

The image zoomed out, as if they were watching through the eyes of a bird who suddenly took flight. It showed craggy mountains smoothing into white plains before hitting a thick woods.

“Ah-hah. I recognize that area. It’s in Verglas, a dozen or so miles from your border. That mountain on the horizon is called Gelus. She’s heading for Frigus Forest,” Angelique said.

Severin was already placing folded clothes in a pack by the time Angelique finished identifying the landscape. He moved swiftly, wasting no movements but remaining controlled and tidy.

“You are going after her?” Angelique asked, watching Severin select two waterproof maps.

“Yes,” Severin said, opening a chest on the far side of the room to unearth a crossbow, three hand axes, and a rolled cloth case of daggers.

“Bring clothes for her as well,” the enchantress suggested, smoothing the shimmering skirt of her dress.

Severin nodded and opened the door to tell Burke, “Send for Emele, and have Fidele and a spare mount of similar build and temperament saddled. Also ask Bernadine to make up a saddle pack with provisions to last two people a week.” Severin shut the door before his valet could bow. “Will you remain here long?” he asked Angelique as he strapped his saddle pack shut.

“I will be here when you return,” the enchantress said. “I am interested in meeting this Elle girl.”

“I will inform a steward who will have a room cleaned out for you.”

“No need, I have friends in the area I wish to stay with. I would appreciate it if you did not alert your family of my arrival,” Angelique said, a pained expression briefly flickering across her lovely face.

Severin paused for a moment. “Lucien recited poetry about you for some time after you left,” he said.

“Lucien is a toad. Or he will be if you tell him I am here,” Angelique promised.

Severin cracked a half smile before hanging the pack over his shoulder and picking up his weapons. “Then I apologize for my abrupt exit. I cannot thank you enough for your help. Is there any way to repay you?”

“Seeing you with Elle will be enough.”

Severin bowed. “If you need anything seek out Burke. He is discreet and will grant you whatever you desire.”

“Thank you, and take care, Your Highness. I look forward to your return.”

“Thank you, for everything, My Lady,” Severin said before leaving his room. He stalked to Lucien’s study, moving with a feline grace he hadn’t lost with his transformation.

The guards outside Lucien’s study eyed Severin but made no move to stop him when the obviously displeased prince threw the door open without knocking.

Lucien looked up from the couch he was dramatically sprawled across. “Oh, Severin, it’s you. Perfect timing. Mumsy just sent me a note that father is intending to hold another ball this week. Since you did nothing but stand in a corner at the last four I thought you might want to escape it and run off to—.”

“Lucien.”

“What? Are you going somewhere?” the golden haired prince asked, finally noticing Severin’s pack and accessories.

“Yes. I’m going after Elle.”

“Ranger Seventy Eight?”

“No. *Elle*.”

“I fail to see the difference, they’re the same thing.”

“No, they aren’t. Elle is a person, not a numbered, faceless servant. When she returns she will no longer be subject to your fits of fancy,” Severin said, resting the butt of the crossbow on the back of a chair.

“I know that. You paid off her contract,” Lucien frowned.

“Also we will **not** be going to war with Arcainia. It will ruin our foreign alliances, place undue stress on our citizens, and sacrifice soldiers who did not join our army for the purpose of getting you another toy. It’s a foolish idea. I won’t support it, and I will fight it with every piece of power and influence I possess,” Severin vowed, his eyes almost glowing with anger.

Lucien briefly pursed his lips. “Okay,” he agreed.

Severin blinked at the unexpected reply. “What.”

“If you don’t want to go to war we won’t. I don’t know why you’re reacting so. All you had to do was say no,” Lucien said, pillowing his head on his arms.

“I’ve spent the last year telling you why we shouldn’t go to war.”

“Yes, but you never said no. I’ve told you before, Severin, you’re my brother. If you don’t want to do something, we won’t do it. You’ve got better judgment than I anyway. Except for your taste in women,” Lucien said, wrinkling his nose.

“You know that I love Elle?”

“Of course I did. I figured you were sunk after our last meeting in the lodge—before this commoner girl you would have more self awareness than to purchase a pony.”

“Then why did you send her on this mission? Why did you let me rage against her?”

“Because I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. I mean really, brother. A commoner?”

“And I’m an illegitimate son. What of it?”

“Oh come now, that’s hardly the same,” Lucien protested. “Ranger Seventy Eight—,”

“Stop calling her that. Her name is Elle.”

Lucien sat up and studied Severin. “You’re serious. You plan to marry her, don’t you?”

Severin pinched the bridge of his nose. “If she’ll have me. I was the one that enslaved her, and then I insulted her and stormed at her. I’m not certain she’ll forgive me.”

Lucien gave an aggravated exhale. “She will. She isn’t stupid, she’s an intelligencer. So I’ll have to get along without her, then? Fine. If you see something redeemable in her I’m sure I will. Eventually. I’ll make myself grow to love her too,” Lucien reasoned.

Severin stared at his brother as he adjusted his grip on his crossbow.
“I mean like! Just like, I promise!” Lucien said.

A smile eased across Severin’s face, cutting the tension. “Thank you, Lucien. I am blessed to call you my brother.”

Lucien made a shooing gesture. “I know it. Now get out of here, you have a woman to rescue.”



Elle shifted in her makeshift shelter, shivering with cold and pain. Her leg ached and the dagger wound on her arm throbbed, but she had the papers. Elle obsessively felt through her clothes for the hidden pouch cinched around calf. It contained orders for the Verglas assassin’s guild. When Elle delivered these papers to the palace Severin would be safe. Hopefully.

The guild had chased her across the country; she lost them just before Frigus Forest in the Obitus Straight. She doubted they would catch up—she had purposely made her presence known in a mountain range, prodding dozens of mountain hags to investigate.

Thankfully she had managed to get away, but Elle knew there was still a good chance she would be killed before she reached Loire’s borders, horseless and injured as she was.

Elle briefly shut her eyes, leaning her head against the tree trunk she was wedged against. She was exhausted, and needed to rest for just a few minutes before pushing on. After she rested she would leave Frigus Forest.

The howling wind sounded strangely like someone calling her name.

“Just another sign of exhaustion,” Elle said, flexing her numb fingers.

“*Elle.*”

It was with a pain to her heart that Elle realized the voice sounded like Severin. “I miss him,” she said.

“*Elle.*”

“I wish he would forgive me,” Elle sighed, her head lolling on her neck. She was so cold it hurt.

“*Elle!*”

Elle opened her eyes and peered out of the bush-like shelter she had constructed. Someone was standing a few feet away, their back was to her

but it sounded like... “Severin?”

The figure turned around, revealing amber eyes and a chiseled face. “Elle,” he said, a smile cracking on his lips.

He was at her side in an instant, pulling her out of her shelter and into a warm embrace. “You’re safe,” he said, his voice heavy with relief.

Elle briefly leaned her head against his chest. Was this a dream? She felt warmer in his arms; he blocked the wind better than her terrible shelter had.

Severin brushed frost from her hair, jolting Elle from her frozen stupor.

He was real, even though he was so cursed good looking. He wasn’t a hallucination. “Are you *mad*? What are you doing here?” Elle said, pulling away from the prince.

Severin held out a folded blanket. “I’m here for you.”

Elle stared at the blanket before raising her eye to Severin’s face. “Did an assassin get to you and pound your head in?”

Severin stepped closer, attempting to wrap the blanket around Elle. “No.”

“Then what in the name of all things smart and intelligent prompted you to come to Verglas? In case you’ve forgotten the assassins guild here is trying to **KILL YOU!**” Elle shouted, dodging the blanket.

“I’m aware of the risk I took in coming, but you needed help.”

Elle shook her head. She knew she was on the verge of hysteria. She had spent the last two months creeping among assassins, trying not to think of her broken heart. She had been injured and chased across the country, and now Severin chose to come prancing into a territory that was dangerous—if not downright deadly—to him? “You told me to leave. You said you never wanted to see me again,” Elle said, tossing her head.

“I was wrong. We can talk about this later, Elle. We need to get you to civilization,” Severin said, still brandishing the blanket as he sidled closer.

“No, no, no! We will **not** talk about this later! You need to leave, now.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

“SEVERIN! I broke your curse, I put up with being yelled at, and I coned my way into an assassins’ guild for you. Isn’t that enough? Can’t

you just leave me alone?” Elle said, covering her eyes with her gloved hands.

“I’m not asking you to do anything more for me, Elle. I’m asking you to let me serve you,” Severin quietly said. “I said it before, but I will say it as many times as you need to me. I was wrong. I was too pigheaded to see the truth. So now will you let me protect you?”

Elle lowered her hands. “The assassins—,”

“I can take care of a few ragged attackers. Even if you haven’t shaken all of the assassins off your trail—which I suspect you have—they will be in no condition to face me, as frozen and unprepared as they are. Trust me, Elle. You have done much for me, let me protect you,” Severin calmly said, holding out the blanket.

Elle’s shoulders heaved as she stared at Severin. She abruptly tipped forward, falling against him. “You broke my heart you big cat,” she muttered as he wrapped the blanket around her.

“We shall see,” Severin enigmatically said, scooping Elle up in his arms.

Elle pressed her face against his cloak, shielding her face from the stinging wind. “How did you find me?”

“Magic. And an enchantress,” Severin said, boosting her onto Fidele’s back.

Elle shivered as Severin mounted up behind her. “I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. Can Fidele carry us both?”

“For a time. I brought an extra mount, we’ll switch when we have to. Sleep, Elle.”

Elle didn’t have the strength to protest. She fell asleep listening to Severin’s beating heart, joy warming her from the inside out. Severin had come for her.

Chapter 15

Partners in Life

Hunger woke Elle, gnawing at her stomach like a crazed animal.

Elle slowly opened her eyes to find there were three people in her room. A woman stood at the fireplace at the far end of the room, a second woman stood at the door, and a man stood at Elle's bedside.

Elle blinked blearily at the man, who was stirring some sort of tea concoction. He was stout with a jolly face and warm eyes. "Duval?" she said, her voice rusty.

Duval smiled, a gesture that lit up his face. "The Mademoiselle is awake," he announced.

The woman at the door ran into the hallway. "Elle is awake!" she shouted.

The woman at the fireplace, Emele, flew across the room. "Elle!" she said, crying and laughing at once.

Emele hugged Elle, barely giving her time to sit upright. "I'm so glad you're here! I'm sorry for what I said," Emele said, squeezing her tight. "I missed you so much."

"And I missed you," Elle laughed

"If I could intrude for a moment, but Mademoiselle Elle has been through much. If you would drink this restorative tea—," Duval started before he was plowed over by Bernadine.

"Elle!" Bernadine said, her voice as warm and inviting as her morning pastries. "We're delighted that you have returned."

"Where am I?" Elle asked, looking around the room. She didn't recognize it. It was a bedroom for certain—one larger and even more lavish than her chateau room—and it was decorated in golds and sedate reds.

"You're in Chanceux Chateau, darling," Bernadine chortled, affectionately smacking Elle as if she were the silliest thing in the world. (The smack jolted Elle with its force.)

"But this isn't my room," Elle said.

"It is now," Emele said, seating herself on the edge of Elle's mattress.

“But, what about my old room,” Elle stammered.

“It’s still there,” Bernadine nodded.

“I don’t understand,” Elle said.

“What these two ninnies aren’t telling you is that His Honor himself ordered this room cleaned for your use,” a strong voice drawled from the door.

Elle smiled. “Heloise.”

“Elle,” Heloise nodded with a snappy nod. “Duval, are you well?”

“Quite right,” Duval muttered, fixing his askew glasses. “Now if you’ll excuse me, but Mademoiselle Elle really needs to be—,”

A housemaid threw open the doors of Elle’s new bedroom. “His Highness wishes to see Elle!” she announced.

Bernadine turned, bouncing Duval away from the bed with her backside. “I shouldn’t be surprised. What a delight! Come, girls—and Duval. We will leave the two of them alone.”

Emele hugged Elle again. “I have so much I wish to speak about, but it will wait. I am ever so glad you are home, Elle,” she said before getting up and following Bernadine from the room.

“Come on, Duval. You lost the battle before you even waged it,” Heloise told the barber-physician.

“But Mademoiselle Elle really should been cared for,” Duval complained.

“I am certain His Worshipness will see to it,” Heloise dryly said.

The barber-physician grumbled—gathering up his medical instruments. He bowed deeply at Elle. “Mademoiselle Elle, allow me to voice my happiness that you have returned. I expect I shall see you later today,” he said before leaving.

Heloise, who was right behind him, paused in the doorway. “Elle, welcome home,” she said, closing the door before Elle could reply. Elle could hear the dour housekeeper speak through the door. “Bernadine, listening at the doorway will not count for giving them privacy. Move along, His Mystifying has earned an audience with the girl.”

All was quiet for a few moments, and Elle took the chance to stand—grateful to find that while she slept Emele had apparently wrangled her into one of Elle’s plainest dresses.

As Elle stretched the door clicked open, and Severin, dressed in a dark green waistcoat, entered. He shut the door behind him, briefly leaning

against it. “Elle,” he said.

“Hello, Severin.”

“How do you feel?” Severin asked, approaching Elle with glittering eyes.

Elle swallowed and reached for a chair to support herself. “Fine. A little addled. I didn’t recognize the room,” Elle said, looking down at the chair and realizing the ornate arms and legs were leafed with real gold.

“Do you like it?” Severin inquired.

“It’s very... elaborate,” Elle said.

Severin chuckled. “You find it gaudy, don’t you?”

“Maybe a little,” Elle grinned. Her eyes went wide and she grabbed for her hidden pouch. It wasn’t there! Elle whirled around and spotted it on a tea table set next to her bed. She swiped it and removed rolled up papers from inside of it, breathing in relief. “Here—I was supposed to take them to the palace but I’m sure you’ll see His Highness Prince Lucien before I will.”

“What is it?” Severin asked, unrolling the papers.

“The reason I went to the assassin’s guild. It’s the contract Arcainia made with them for your assassination. You can use it to barter with Arcainia. If it is made known that they contracted the guild to kill you *their* country will be ruined,” Elle grinned.

Severin studied for the papers for a moment. “Why? Why risk your life for this?”

“They were going to keep after you, Severin. I took the mission because I wanted to stop them. Arcainia will cancel the contract if you lean on them politically now that you have proof.”

Severin set the papers aside and reached out, grazing Elle’s cheekbone with his thumb. “I am sorry, Elle, for the pain I caused you.”

“I lied to you. I should have told you the truth about who I was.”

“Yes,” Severin agreed. “But I should have given you the chance to explain yourself. I was confused and grieved.”

“You thought I was your brother’s spy.”

“No, I thought you didn’t love me.”

Elle looked up into Severin’s blazing eyes. “What changed your mind?”

Severin ruefully smiled. “An enchantress told me I was being a dolt.”

“The one that helped you with the curse?”

“The one and the same. She explained to me that I misunderstood the conditions of breaking my curse. In order for it to break a woman had to fall in love with me.”

Elle’s cheeks burned and she turned her back to Severin, inexplicably embarrassed. “I thought you told me as much before. I certainly told you so before your brother arrived.”

Severin chuckled. “I did not finish. A woman had to fall in love with me, *and* I had to fall in love with her.”

Elle froze as she replayed Severin’s words in her mind. She blinked, still shocked and disbelieving when Severin stood behind her and slipped his arms around her waist.

“I am sorry, Elle, for my harsh words,” Severin said pulling Elle against his chest. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yes. Do you forgive me for lying?” Elle asked, propping her head against his chest.

Severin leaned forward to kiss her cheek. “Yes. I love you, Elle.”

“I love you, Severin.”

Elle wished the moment would last forever. She felt safe and secure with Severin’s arms wrapped around her, her chest warm with the knowledge that she was loved and treasured.

Severin briefly drew away from Elle, only to step in front of her. “Just to iron out the details so I can be sure we both understand—We are in love, and will be engaged and married. And while it is not likely we will be happy forever after—because I *am* a prince and we will be forced to occasionally cavort with ‘polite society,’ which will probably make us both very unhappy—we will experience joy and pain and sadness together and live life as husband and wife?”

“You haven’t asked me to marry you,” Elle said.

“My darling Elle. When I ask you I will make it as romantic as possible, shower you with food, and do everything in my power to woo you. However, I find myself less than enthused by the prospect of any more surprises, so I would like to be sure. Is that what you see in our future?”

“We will fight.”

“And then we will forgive each other.”

“I will still rub plant leaves.”

“And I will very likely make squirrel jokes until another woodland creature bites you.”

Elle laughed. “Yes. Yes, yes, yes!”

Severin smiled and pulled Elle into a kiss, one that was saturated with all the love, laughter, and affection Severin was capable of giving. It melted Elle’s bones and warmed her heart, making her lean into Severin. It was a perfect moment. Not even the knowledge that Bernadine was standing on the balcony outside, spying on the pair, could lessen it.

Severin and Elle were in love.



A journeying farmer and his two children were surprised when, in late summer, they discovered that the road from the village of Belvenes to Noyers was in excellent condition.

The woods that had previously intruded on the road were pushed back, potholes and washouts had been filled in with dirt and gravel, and in the middle of the forest was a chateau.

The farmer knew it was there; previously it had housed a cursed prince. But it seemed like a different place now.

Gardeners walked up and down the lane, laughing with each other as they trimmed bushes and cared for flowers. A veritable pack of dogs—led by a fat, fluffy Papillon—roamed the front lawn. There had to be at least forty horses in the stable. Two—a proud looking gelding and a chubby pony—were being led through the chateau gate as the farmer and his children watched.

The grounds were awash in flowers and laughter, and royal flags flapped in the wind.

“Pardon me,” the farmer asked, stopping at the gatehouse where several soldiers were stationed. “But what is this place?”

As if on cue, someone past the chateau walls roared. “ELLE! DID YOU PUT A STUFFED CAT IN MY STUDY?”

A pretty woman on the fat pony galloped out of the courtyard, calling over her shoulder. “I thought you might like the company of one of your own kind!”

A handsome man emerged from the courtyard, riding the large gelding. “Elle!”

“What’s wrong, cat got your tongue?” the woman laughed.

“I look nothing like a cat anymore, why do you still obsess over felines?” the man said, cueing his horse into a trot.

The woman pulled her pony to a halt a stone’s throw from the farmer and his children. “True, it’s my own fault I suppose. I shouldn’t have married a man who is prettier than I am.”

The man on the mouse colored gelding looked murderous.

The woman laughed airily before her pony leaped forward into a canter. “That will teach you to inquire after the mysterious workings of **my** mind. Come, Rosemerry. Let us find some flowers to rub.”

“ELLE!”

The farmer stared at the spectacle as his children chased each other.

The guard captain smiled. “This is Chanceux Chateau. Home to the formidable Prince Severin and his extraordinary wife, Princess Elle, and all that they hold dear.”

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The Wild Swans: a Timeless Fairy Tale: Since she was chosen by the King and Queen of Arcainia to be their foster child, Elise has done her best to be the ideal princess. She is the head of the Treasury Department, a celebrated flutist, and an experienced rider, but some of her foster brothers still refuse to refer to her as their sister. It doesn't matter, though, because all of Elise's royal accomplishments prove to be worthless when a witch ensnares her foster father with an enchantment and curses her brothers, changing them into swans. To break her foster brothers' curse, Elise must knit them shirts of stinging nettles. The already dire situation turns disastrous when a prince finds Elise and starts trying to woo her, to the grave displeasure of Elise's foster brothers. Elise thought her life as a princess would be perfect, but between defying a witch and freeing her brothers it is anything but.

About the Author

K.M. Shea is a book lover, champion web surfer, and all around geek. She's been writing for over ten years and has worked as librarian and a newspaper reporter. K.M. lives in the quaint

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